gameinformer®

#1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

RESTRICTED AREA
QUARANTINED

UNLEASH THE POWER OF POINTS

ELITE PROS GET 3X POINTS

FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT*

PROS GET 2X POINTS FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT*

Redeem points for in-store coupons, digital currency, sweepstakes entries and tons more.

Get the most out of your PowerUp Rewards membership with the GameStop app.

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

GameStop POWERUP REWARDS™

VISIT **POWERUPREWARDS.COM** FOR MORE DETAILS

ELITE PRO
POWERUP

MAY

PRO OFFERS

EXCLUSIVELY FOR ELITE PRO AND PRO MEMBERS

25% OFF

ALL CHESS SETS AND MONOPOLY GAMES

Only @ GameStop
Fallout
MONOPOLY GAMER
MONOPOLY
MONOPOLY GAMER
ZELDA
Chess Set

Offer valid 5/1/18 – 5/31/18 - $10+ in savings.

SAVE $20

$19.99 ~~$39.99~~ Groot Charger

Offer valid 5/1/18 – 5/31/18

SAVE $5

XBOX
PlayStation

$14.99 ~~$19.99~~ Talon Media Remote for Xbox One

$19.99 ~~$24.99~~ Media Remote for PlayStation 4

Offer valid 5/14/18 – 5/28/18

BUY 1 GET 1 50% OFF

ALL TRADING CARD BOXES
$19.99 AND HIGHER

Pokémon
LEGENDARY POKÉMON
Ixalan
ELITE TRAINER BOX

Offer valid 5/1/18 – 5/31/18 - $10+ in savings.

ALL HATS AND SOCKS

Offer valid 5/1/18 – 5/31/18 - Up to $10 in savings.

Valid for Elite Pro and Pro members only.
Offers and prices valid in Continental U.S. only. All prices in U.S. dollars. Offers cannot be combined with any other offer or discount. Some offers not valid on GameStop.com or EBgames.com. Selection may vary by store. All dates and prices are subject to change. Not responsible for typographical errors, price variances or manufacturer delays. PC products not available in all stores. All offers are available while supplies last. Rain checks will not be issued. No product substitutions are allowed. Trades must be in full working condition to receive full value. Defective items may be eligible for trade at a lesser value. Trades subject to manager approval. See sales associate for complete details. No dealers. Void where prohibited. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate,modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice. © 2018 GameStop, Inc.

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com
@GI_AndyMc

Diversity Isn't A Debate

I still get the emails that explain to me how *Game Informer* should stick to games and avoid being political. While I appreciate all feedback (and I read it), I don't think the world of video games is so simple anymore. We can't just play Sonic and shut up.

Games have grown up and are a cultural phenomenon. We would be foolish to not address or represent a gamer's view as it stands in the world today. It is important we do our best to support and also shame the game space when games aren't doing right for the world or for the people who play them.

Games are powerful. We see games blamed for mass murders, and we hear stories of games changing people's lives for the better. While I feel the argument that connects games to violence is flimsy, *Game Informer* can't ignore the discussion. It brings games into a direct discussion with the Constitution, so yes, at times, we will cross into the political space.

Addressing the hardships gaming faces is never easy, but we like to contrast it with all the powerful things the medium achieves to make our world a better place. Kim Wallace wrote a fantastic piece in this issue: "Women Creating a Brighter Future For Games" (pg. 10). This stuff is important. Games are for everyone, and should be made by everyone, yet there are people who want to put this right up for debate.

You can question our methods, dislike our magazine, and think I am a moron if you like, but do not think for a moment that there is any political slant, bias, or agenda when it comes to diversity in games and in the world. I hate to break it to you, but the world is a diverse place, and if games want to continue to grow and engage people around the world (and at the same time bring us new and exciting experiences), we need to welcome these changes with open arms – and not stomp our feet because we got one less predictable protagonist.

Things aren't perfect yet by any means, and we have our own diversity problems here at *Game Informer*, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't work toward it being better, because it should be better.

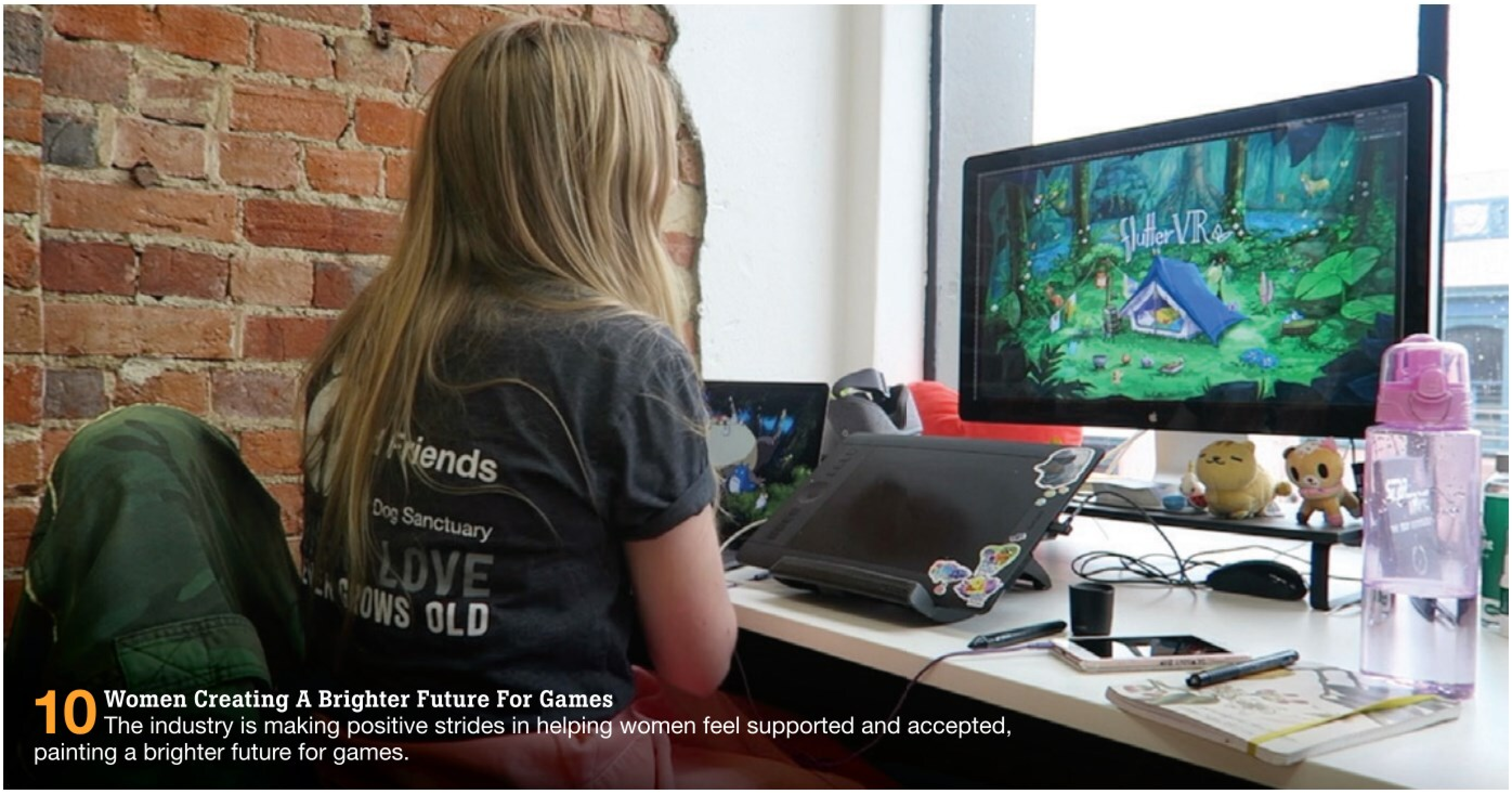
I love seeing (and playing!) games from new perspectives, and this magazine will continue to support them.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

50 Days Gone

Syphon Filter developer Sony Bend Studio is moving far beyond its comfort zone with Days Gone, an ambitious open-world game where danger lurks on every stretch of the broken road. After hours of extensive hands-on time with it, we're eager to share what we learned about the post-apocalyptic game and the people who built it. ***by Jeff Cork***



10 Women Creating A Brighter Future For Games
The industry is making positive strides in helping women feel supported and accepted, painting a brighter future for games.

18 Taking A Turn
Turn-based tactics games are experiencing a boom right now. We highlight the most promising ones coming to the reinvigorated genre in 2018.

22 Balancing Act
We look into the imperfect art of competitive-multiplayer balancing.

06 Feedback

26 Gamer:
Derek "Shesez"
Of Boundary Break

28 The Good, The Bad,
And The Ugly

30 Afterwords:
Celeste

42 Interview: Justin Ma
& Matthew Davis

44 Gear

48 Top Ten Motorcycles

49 Timeline

64 Previews

84 Reviews

94 Classic:
NBA Jam

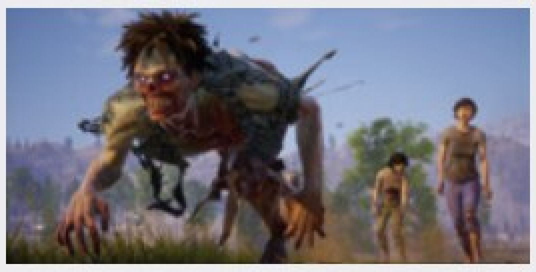
96 Game Over:
Don't Say The Z-Word!

34 Impulse: Captivating Indies On The Horizon
We walked away from recent conventions with a collection of indie games we're excited about.

32 Massive: Shroud Of The Avatar
Our PC editor spent a ton of time in the latest MMO from Richard Garriott, the creator of the Ultima series.

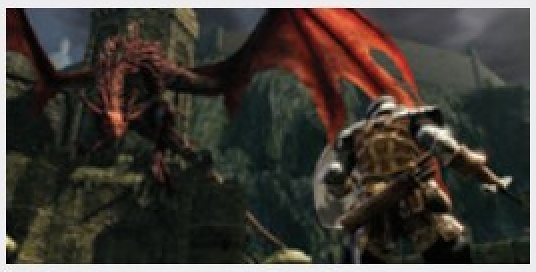
38 The Possibilities And Perils Of Blockchain
Blockchain is a complicated buzzword at the forefront of every investor's mind right now. We look at its exciting – and scary – potential in the world of video games.

64 **Shadow Of The Tomb Raider** Developer Eidos Montreal calls this the third and final installment of the rebooted series.



66 **State Of Decay 2** The original had some rough edges, but we loved its potential. We check in to see how the sequel is coming along.

68 **GTFO** From the minds of Payday comes a game that takes cooperative horror to space.



70 **Dark Souls Remastered** Dark Souls returns with a new coat of paint, and we're excited to revisit Lordran on new platforms.

71 **Below** The long dormant roguelike from Capy Games is finally coming soon! We go hands on.

75 **Detroit: Become Human** We check in with Quantic Dream one last time before its science-fiction adventure goes live.

79 **Hot Lava** Picture playing "the floor is lava" with your friends – but in a video game.

82 **Radical Heights** From the ashes of Lawbreakers rises the goofiest battle royale game to date.

86 **Far Cry 5** We love the chaos of Far Cry 5, but the story left us severely disappointed.

87 **Minit** This indie gem tasks players with saving the world one minute at a time.

88 **God Of War** The latest entry in the series is the best game we've played so far in 2018.

games index

Apocalypse Cow 34
Aztez 75
Bad North 34
Banner Saga 3, The. 19
Bard's Tale IV, The. 20
Batman: The Enemy Within
  Episode 5 – Same Stitch 92
Below 69
Black Future '88 35
Celeste 30
Dark Souls Remastered 68
Days Gone 50
Descenders 35
Detective Pikachu 92
Detroit: Become Human 73
Dying Light: Bad Blood 70
Earthfall 71
Extinction 92
Far Cry 5 86
Frostpunk 91
God of War 88
GTFO 66
Hot Lava 79
Kids 35
Mega Man X
  Legacy Collection 81
Messenger, The. 36
Minit 87
MLB The Show 18 90
Moonlighter 36
Mosaic 36
Mutant Year Zero:
  Road to Eden. 20
NBA Jam 94
Pathfinder: Kingmaker 78
Phantom Doctrine 21
Phoenix Point. 21
Radical Heights 75
Rise of Industry 36
Shadow of the Tomb Raider. . . . 64
Shroud of the Avatar 32
Sinking City, The 83
SpyParty 76
State of Decay 2 82
Underworld Ascendant 80
Untitled Goose Game. 36
#WarGames. 92
What the Golf? 36
World Next Door, The. 36
World of Warcraft:
  Battle for Azeroth 77

NEW!
SWEET HEAT
Skittles®
RILE THE RAINBOW
TASTE THE RAINBOW

©2018 Mars or Affiliates.

feedback

Game Informer's 300th issue was devoted almost entirely to the greatest games of all time, and so were this month's responses from readers. Luckily, we were right about everything!

One Helluva Milestone

Congratulations on making it to issue 300! I appreciate you undertaking the daunting task of listing the top 300 games of all time. It would be pointless to fault you for missing any of my personal favorites, so I won't. However, issue 300 could've also celebrated G.I. for its accomplishment, too. How about a full cover gallery, editors' personal top 10 lists, predictions gone wrong, and more? You've celebrated the games, now let's celebrate G.I. as the magazine we've enjoyed for so many years. Cheers to 300 more!

Michael Tompkins
via email

You have no idea how happy I was to see last issue's Top 300 list. Now I also get to look forward to next month's letters. Reading both the rants and the (hopefully) sarcastic responses is my favorite part. Do you guys notice a correlation between the size of the list and the amount of angry letters?

Casey Herman
via email

We're not sure if it counts as a correlation, but our latest list certainly got plenty of responses this month, so take that as you will. As for more G.I.-focused festivities, we've got a cover gallery, personal top 10 lists, a month of 300-themed Replays, and much more at gameinformer.com!

Loving And Loathing Link

When I saw this issue featured the Top 300 games, I read the first few entries then immediately did what I promised myself I wouldn't do: skip to number one. Imagine my elation when I saw that A Link To The Past was number one! As a 33-year-old woman, I'm often looked at strangely when I tell people I'm still a gamer. Seeing my childhood favorite and still ultimate game as number one literally brought tears to my eyes. I boast that I can play this game with my eyes closed, that I know every secret and yet still my heart pounds when I have to deliver that final arrow to Ganon. Thanks for all you do and keep the great issues coming!

Arianna C. Freyre
via email

Why on Earth wasn't Ocarina Of Time number one on the Top 300? Or at least top 25? For a game that is so important to so many people's childhoods (including mine, and I'm only 13), it seemed remarkably low on the list. I agree with many of your picks above Ocarina, but you could have put it much higher. Nearly everybody you talk to can remember an incredible experience they had with Ocarina, and I've yet to meet anybody who can say the same for A Link To The Past. I agree it's a great game, but it shouldn't be number one. All I can say is that I hope you start getting obvious things right in the future. Thank you!

Nate Sunker
via email

You really need to talk to some non-13-year-olds about A Link To The Past, Nate. Regardless, we did notice a trend in this month's Feedback responses: Younger gamers were more likely to advocate moving modern games higher up on the list, while older gamers were more likely to be objectively right. Guess that's why everyone always says to listen to your elders!

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

This Guy Really Loves Prey…

I don't get why there are so many older games in your Top 300 list. I mean, I like to play Tetris as much as the next guy, but is it really the third best game of all time to play? Personally, I would've included Arkane's Prey over many of your pre-PS1 choices, since it combines being both an open world and a thrilling survival-horror game. It also contains a wide variety of upgrade systems that make it Arkane's best game – and yes, I mean better than both Dishonored games. I honestly feel you could've done a little better to make your decisions based on what are the best games rather than what games were inspirational for their time.

Ian Kennedy
via email

So I reread the list to see if it was really that bad and I found that Mario's Picross, a visual puzzle game which I've never even heard of until today, made it onto the list. Prey, a game with an outstanding story and gameplay, not to mention an amazing amount of lore, was beaten by a visual puzzle. I'm not sure how certain I can be that these are the Top 300 games ever made if that's so.

Ian Kennedy
via email (again)

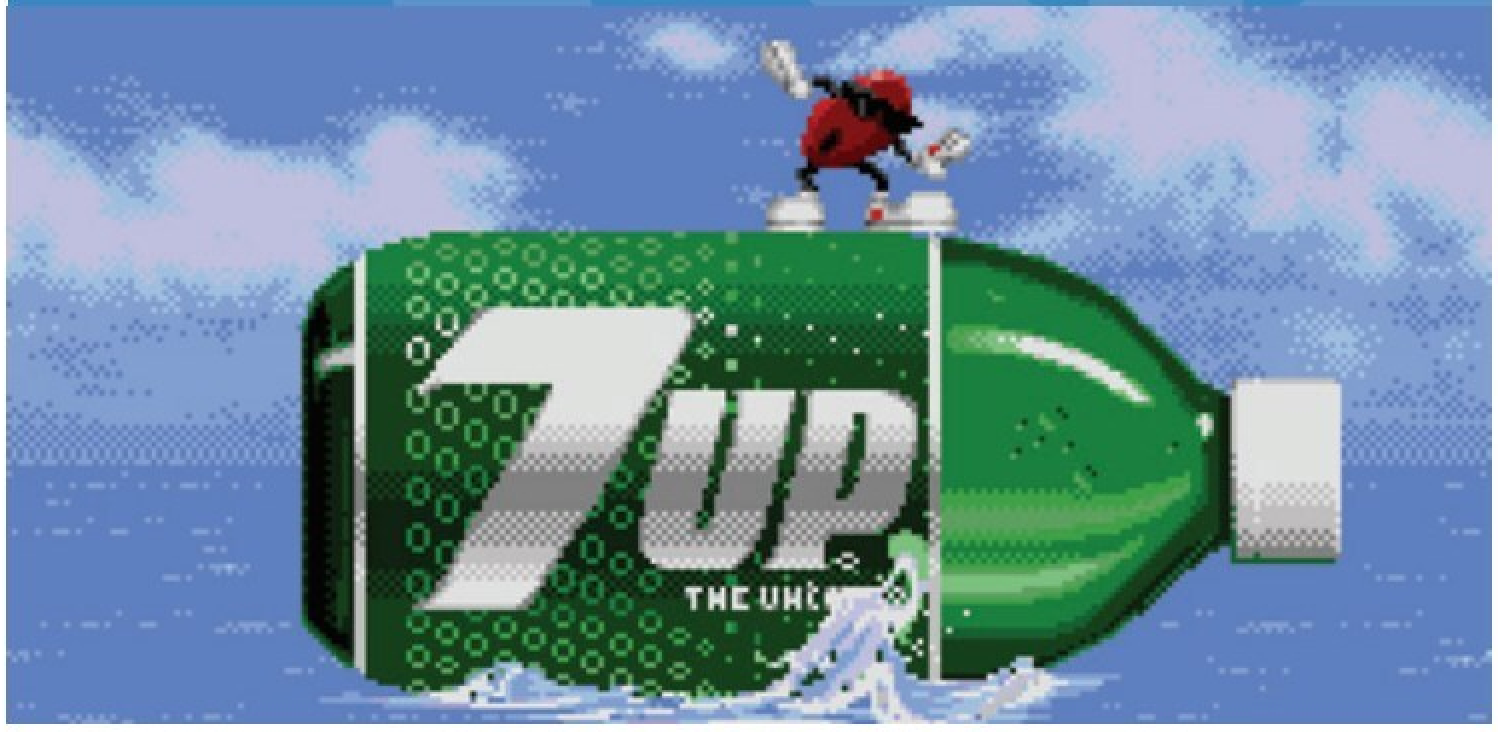
Sounds like our list has made you start to question everything, Ian. Kind of like that one game where you wake up in your apartment only to realize it's actually a simulation. What was the name of it? Oh well, probably not important.

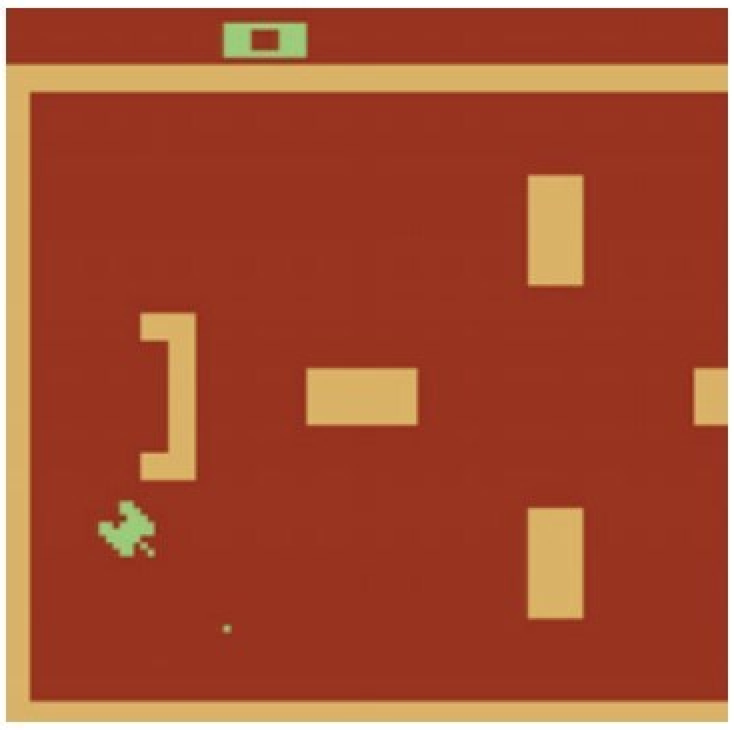
Where Do We Even Start?

No Shenmue or Virtual Fighter 2? Shenmue is infinitely better than any Rockstar game that stole from it, and VF 2 is regarded by many as the best fighting game ever. How about the original Phantasy Star? I'll take that and Phantasy Star 4 over games like Skyrim or The Witcher 3. Also, no Sonic Adventure, Shinobi (Revenge and III), Cool Spot, Rocket Knight Adventures, Xenoblade Chronicles, or any other games that are better than most making your top spots. Arkham City is better than Asylum, and Rise is better than Tomb Raider 2013. I think you need to hire people who aren't under the age of 30 and have played more than the typical fare on modern consoles for your next list. Either that or consult me.

Erin Hoffman
via email

Wowzers. We honestly can't even tell if this barrage of hot takes is supposed to be satirical or not, but feel free to sit and stare at your phone in anticipation of our call.





And This Guy Really Hates Combat…

Seriously, that list is garbage. You have Combat on there while leaving out other, good Atari 2600 games. Almost anything was better than Combat. The people who voted for Combat were probably never stuck with it as one of the only games they had to play. Combat is the game of poor kids, okay? It's insulting that you have it on your Top 300 list after so many people grew to hate it. The fact that it is on there proves your list is bogus.

Mike Wilder
Santa Rosa, CA

We suppose we could argue the merits of Combat at this point, but really we're just amazed that the most passionate Feedback letter we received all month was about Combat.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"How could you deny City Of Heroes its rightful place on the list?"

It's the superhero game the list deserves, but not the one it needs right now.

"Did Dusty Diamond's All-Star Softball come close to the Top 300 or am I the only one who cares deeply about this great game?"

Probably the latter.

"What kind of drugs were you guys on when you came up with that list?"

Truth serum. HA!

Best Subject Line To A Feedback Letter:

"Why did you blathering fools do this?"

Question Of The Month:

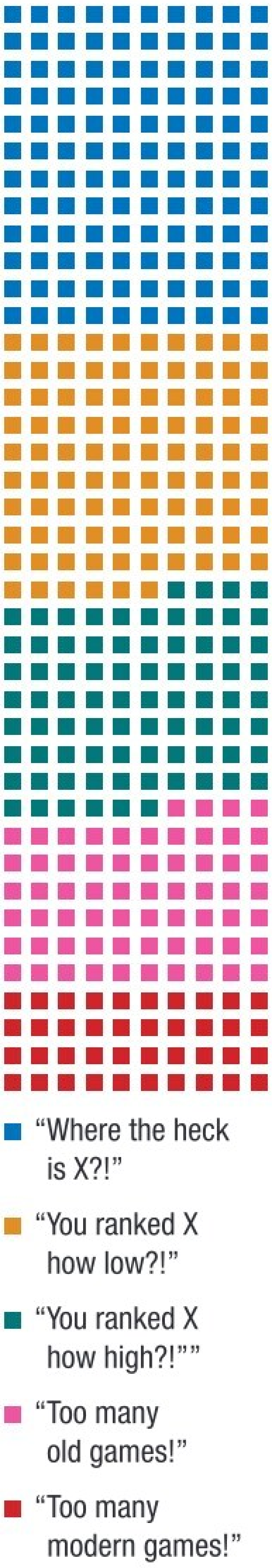
What historical moment would you like to see explored in a video game?

gi spy

(Left) This month, the team leads behind Days Gone were kind enough to show us their new studio, their bikes, and the game! Learn all about it on page 50. **(Right)** Not everything is a competition! PUBG Corp.'s Billy Shibley and Epic Games' Nick Chester got along just fine at this year's GDC.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Forget Something?

In issue 300, we asked readers what were the worst omissions from our Top 300 list, and boy oh boy, did people have answers.

Clearly, the most glaring omission was 1996's Quake. You found space for both Doom and Doom II, but not the original Quake! It was such an improvement over the original Doom, featuring full 3D levels, an engaging and replayable story, and improved online multiplayer modes. It was a shame not to see it anywhere on the list.

Jason C. Kay

I'm completely at a loss on how Wing Commander did not make the list. It was the de-facto space simulator of its day, with consequential gameplay based on your performance in the missions, tight controls, engaging story, interesting enemies, and a killer lounge area between missions.

Matt Wendel

I think that the most shameful omission has to be the original Civilization. How many zillions of hours has that game been played? Later versions may have gotten better, but that was where it began. It certainly deserved a better spot than Alpha Centauri.

Eric Randall

I am shocked that Okami didn't make an appearance. It isn't perfect, but its powerful story and engaging gameplay, not to mention beautiful artwork, should have put it on the list. Not the Wii version, though. We can all agree that was pretty bad.

Tabitha Fisanich

Slighting Seven?

I looked over the Top 300 list about five times. I'm not sure if you guys just forgot or really didn't think it deserved to be on there. Or maybe I just need new glasses, but I did not see Final Fantasy VII anywhere. I know this had to be an error on your part because you did include a lot of well-deserving games on the list and I really don't disagree with the placement of a majority of them. I highly agree with the number-one spot as it is my second-most replayed game ever. The only game I've played more was, you guessed it, Final Fantasy VII. I am sure others may be wondering why this game isn't on the list? Let's not make it a habit to make mistakes like this again. Once is excusable, but I highly doubt it can be forgiven twice.

Bryan O'Shields
via email

I was a little upset when I found out that I had to wait an extra month to read Game Infarcer, until I realized you did sneak an Infarcer joke in the 300 issue. How else can you explain the fact that Final Fantasy VII was not on the Top 300 list? I searched and searched thinking maybe I overlooked it, but to my disappointment it was not there. How can you not put one of the greatest games of all time on there? I'm just hoping that I'm going blind and it was a mistake. I had to have missed it, right?

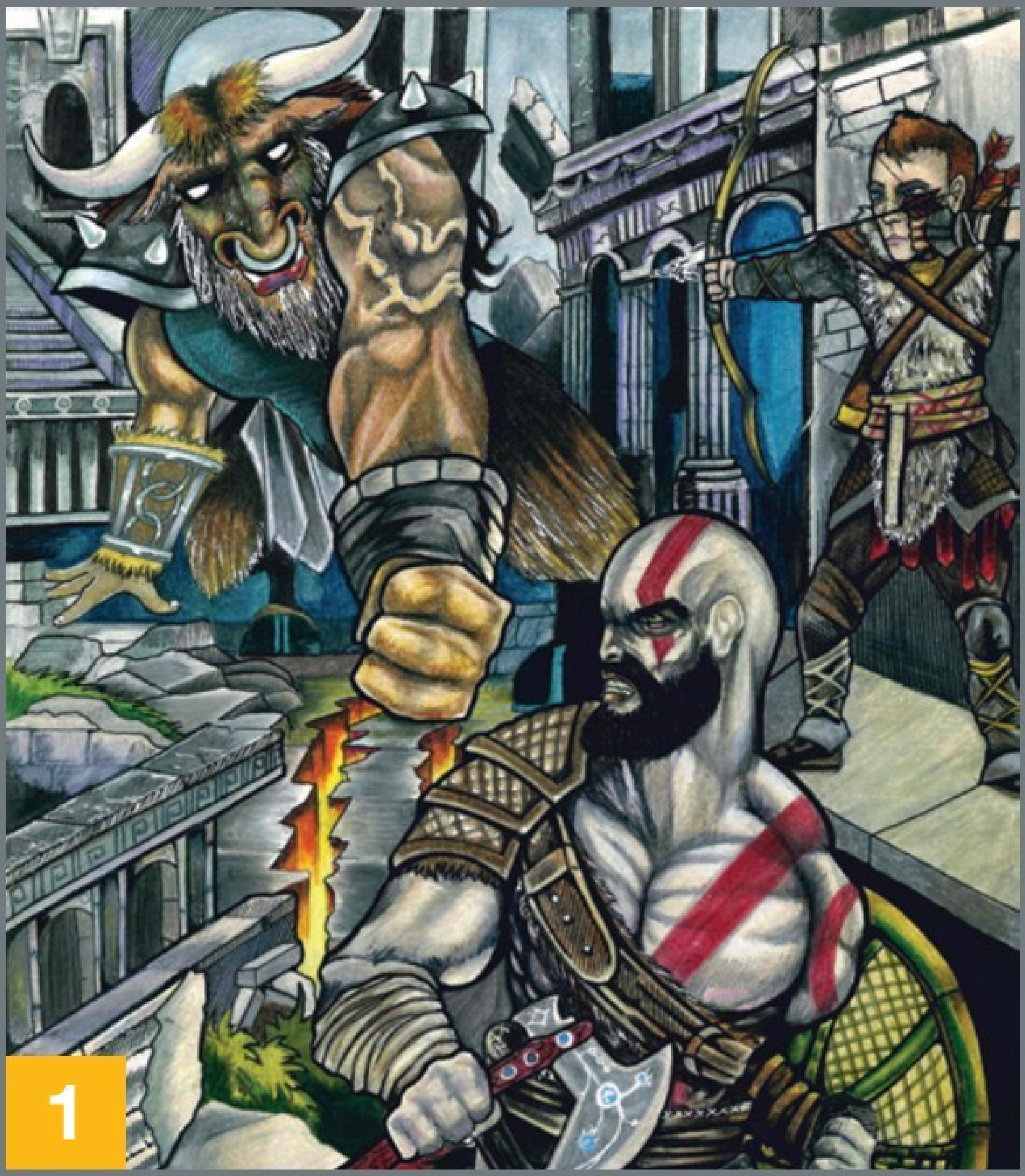
Nick Glatz
via email

Rest easy, Nick: You are indeed going blind. Final Fantasy VII is number 80 on the list.

NAME
Cloud
4x-Cut
E. Skill
Magic
Summon
Item
MP
999
LIMIT
TIME

(Left) Ghost Story Games' Ken Levine was also enjoying the GDC festivities – at least until Shea, Elise, and Imran crashed the party. **(Right)** Maximum Games' Andrew Nguyen and Tinsley PR's Thomas Schulenberg toured the G.I. vault during a recent visit. We'll let them out one of these days.

gallery



1

WINNER

1 Raven Furya

No matter what the art style, Kratos always looks like a badass.

2 Ariel Giles

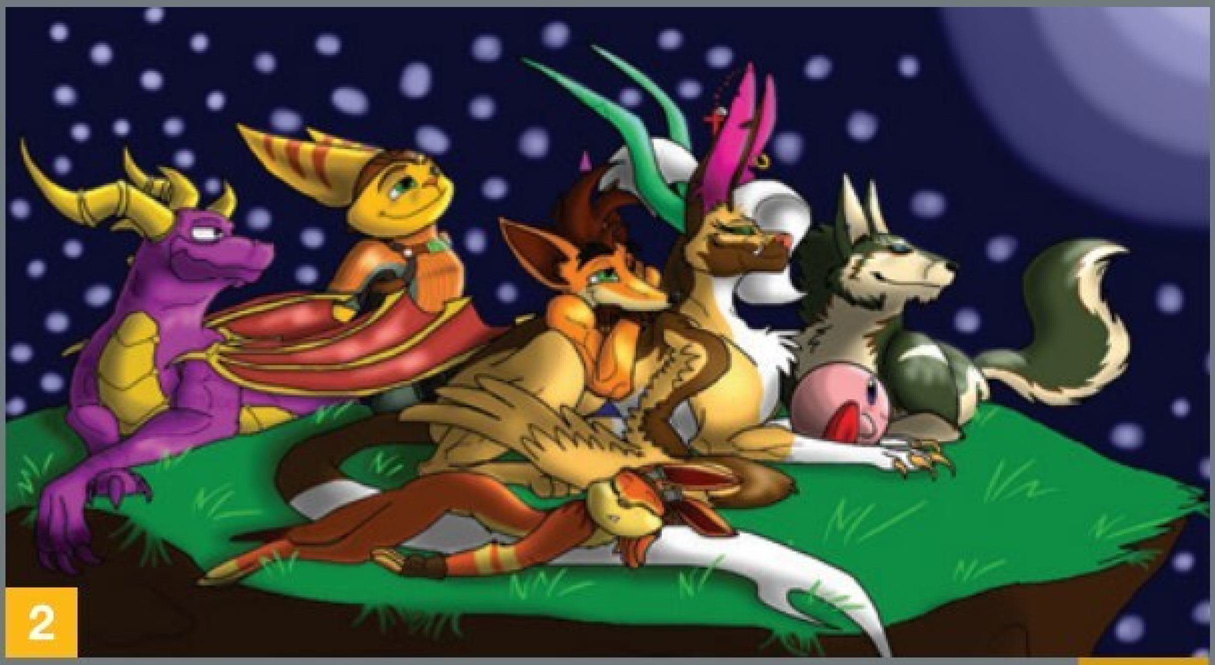
We really want to know what all these guys are watching.

3 Mayte Ramirez

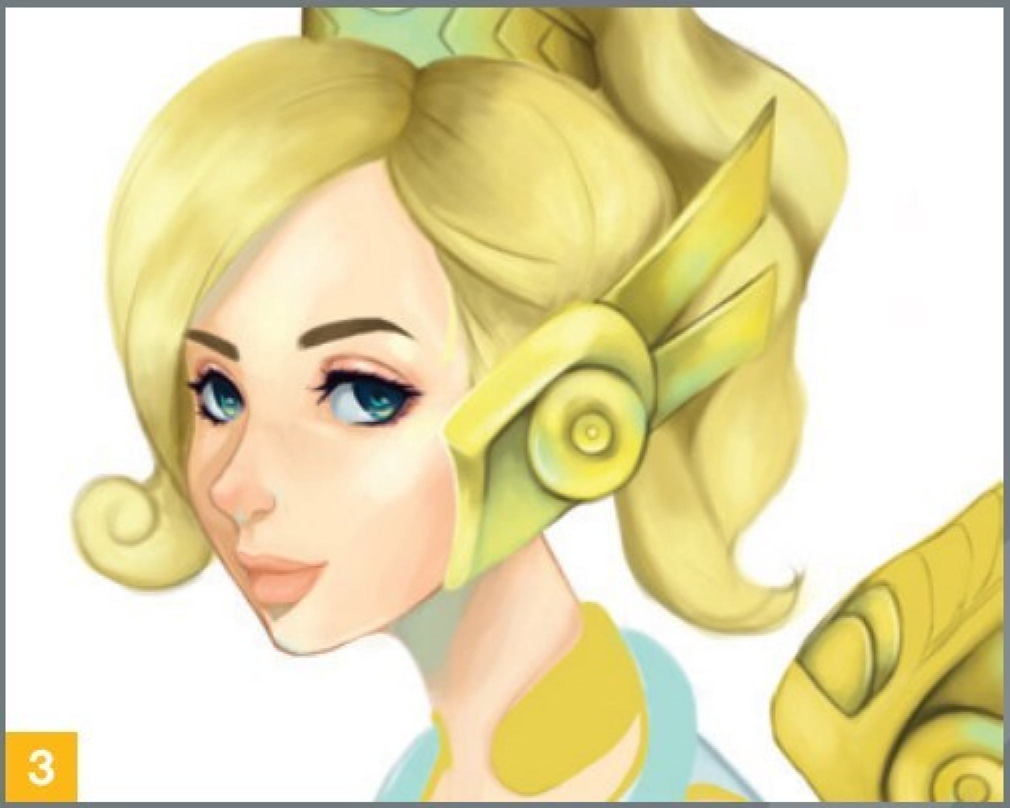
Don't let the smile fool you; Mercy still thinks you're stupid for dying so much.

4 Brandon Davis

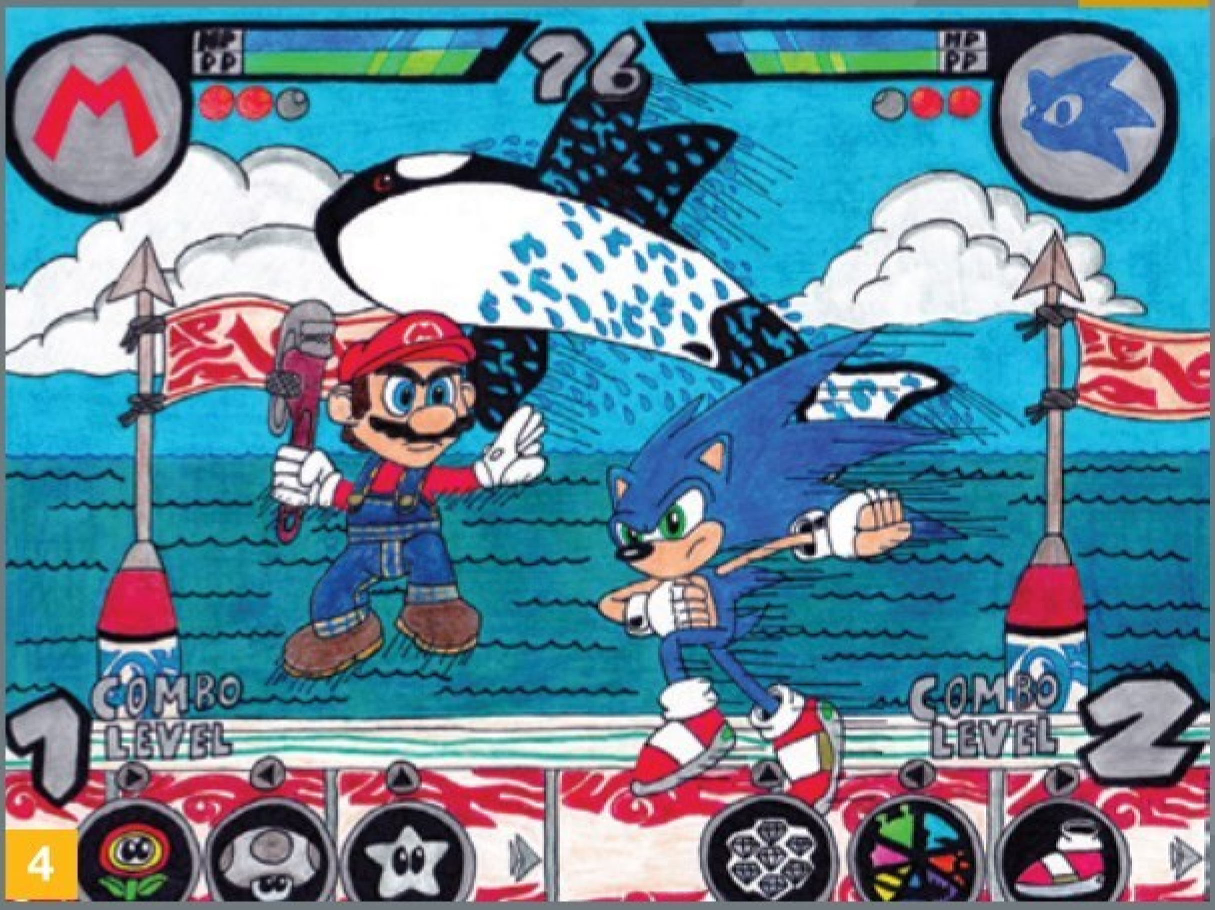
We all know this epic match-up will end in a draw when that giant killer whale lands on them.



2



3



4

» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize «

Please include your name, email address, and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned.

Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest, 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401 **Email to:** ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

(Left) Valve's Kyle Davis and Brad Muir gave Suriel a surreal tour of their new studio, which contains a giant pink "balloonicorn" for some reason. **(Right)** Suriel also visited Midwinter Entertainment to check out their new, unicorn-free online shooter, Scavengers. No, he's not in the picture.

Women Creating A Brighter Future

How the industry is making efforts to reduce the gender gap and support women in gaming

by Kimberley Wallace

For Games

Gaming is for everyone, and intelligent and creative women have always been an integral part of bringing the biggest and best games to life. From Sierra co-founder Roberta Williams, who pioneered the graphic adventure genre with series like King's Quest, to Brenda Romero, who has spent nearly four decades as a programmer and designer in the game industry on franchises like Wizardry and Jagged Alliance, women have made extensive contributions to the industry. This has only continued with women taking more leadership roles, such as Jade Raymond going from executive producer on Ubisoft's juggernaut Assassin's Creed series to co-founding and becoming a GM at EA's Motive Studios.

As the industry grows and more opportunities become available, women will continue to proliferate throughout video game development. But there's still work to do. According to the ESA's 2017 report, over 40 percent of gamers are women, but as the IGDA (International Game Developers Association) found the split of women in development is a little over 20 percent. "That's just not enough," says IGDA executive director Jen MacLean. "It doesn't represent our customers. It doesn't represent the potential talent that's out there, and it really signals that as an industry we are closing ourselves to opportunity and possibility."

Now more than ever, companies are aware of the importance of diversity and creating a more inclusive environment. Xbox head Phil Spencer devoted his entire 2018 D.I.C.E. keynote to this, calling for change and more resources put into those areas. Initiatives are also on the rise to help young girls and professional women embrace their passion and expand their presence. "There are positive stories to be told out there and we don't tell them enough," says Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences president Meggan Scavio. "I don't want to ignore the negative, but let's broadcast the good stories that are happening out there."

To learn more about these positive stories alongside the place of women in games, where it's been and where it's going, we reached out to influential developers, streamers, and leaders to share their experiences and goals.

Jen MacLean
IGDA

Women in Games ambassadors at GDC 2017

Rebecca Cohen-Palacios

Ubisoft Montreal, Pixelles

Shaping Young Minds

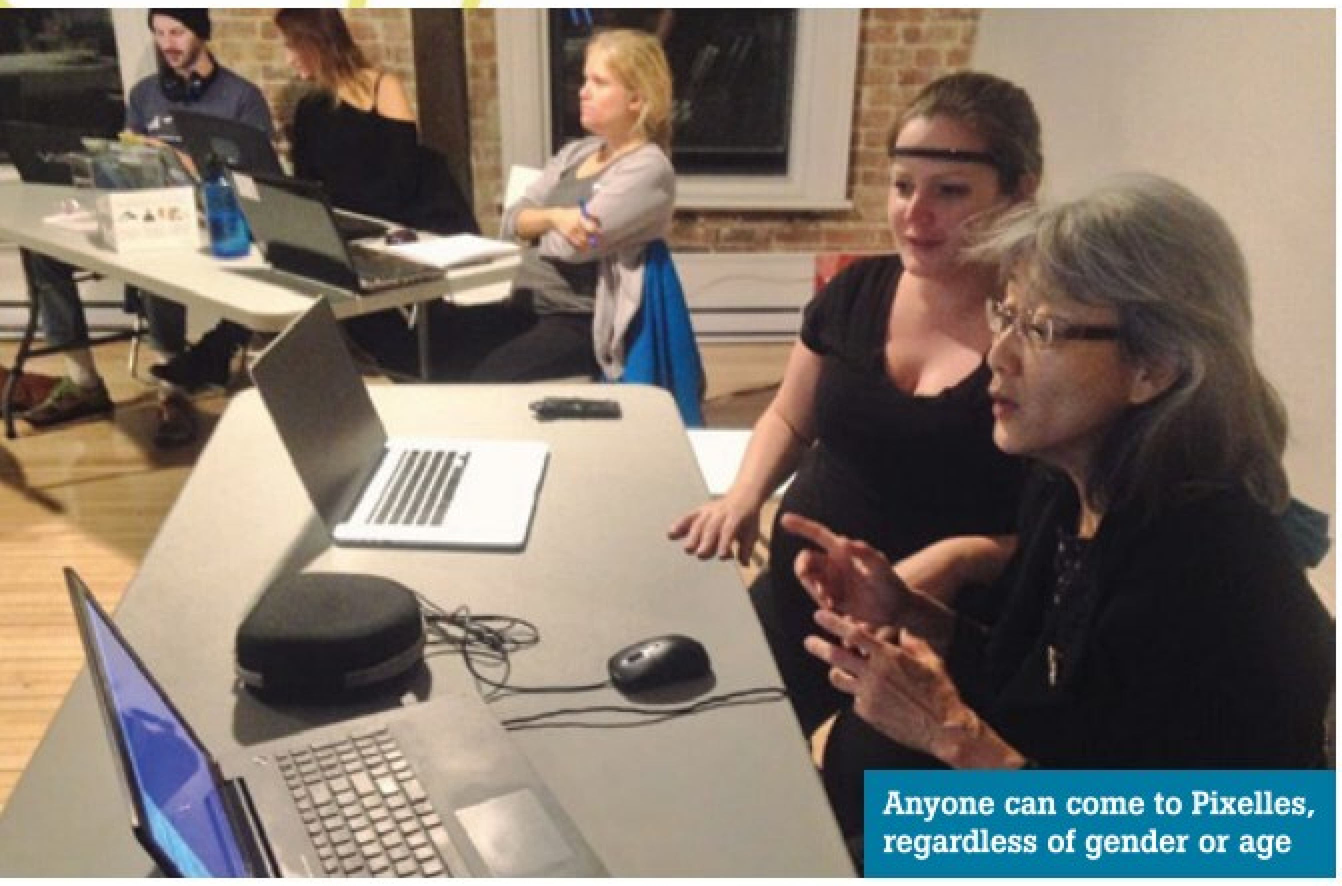
These days accessing games is as easy as picking up your phone or tablet, with technology being omnipresent in children's lives. Teaching kids about the electronic world that surrounds them needs to start at an earlier age, and society can no longer rely on preconceived notions of deprecated gender norms denoting that electronics are for boys. In a recent study conducted by Microsoft in partnership with KRC Research, only 27 percent of young women feel coding jobs are for them, while 52 percent feel powerful doing Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) work. Additionally, between now and 2030, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts the technology industry will be the fastest-growing, but the amount of women pursuing professions in that field will not match the growth. Many initiatives have been put in place to increase girls' interest in STEM, letting them learn about these potential careers at an earlier age.

Girls Make Games is just one example of a thriving, successful program. What started off as a one-time summer camp has blossomed into a string of international camps, workshops, and game jams, all in the name of inspiring and supporting the next generation. Founder Laila Shabir was surprised to see how many girls felt like they "found their people" and could just be themselves at the camp. The whole experience was eye-opening, showcasing to Shabir that even at an early age, girls already had trouble feeling comfortable with their passion for games and finding others who shared their interests. "At the end of the camp, I gathered my team and said, 'I think this is important. We have been given an opportunity to make a difference. It's true we started out to make our own games, but if this is what the world needs right now. Let's do this.'"

That was four years ago. In the time since, Shabir expanded the program to help support more than just young girls (the camp is open to ages eight through seventeen), but also women just kicking off their careers with the GMC Fellowship. This provides a chance for up-and-coming women to not only attend events such as the Game Developers Conference (GDC) and network with key figures at big-name companies, but also offers teaching positions at the Girls Make Games summer camps.

Shabir, who won this year's Entertainment Software Association visionary award for inspiring change, says most girls entering the summer program know very little about the games industry. "That was one of the first shocking things that we saw at the camps, that [the girls] didn't even know the concept of a game studio or production house existed, and if you asked the girls what a game developer does, most of them would just respond 'programming,'" Shabir explains. "They had no idea about music, art, sound effects, or writing – all these things that interest girls – could be a viable career for them." All of these aspects of the industry are included in the summer program, all the way up to publishing and pitching their ideas.

Seeing young girls in camp has given Shabir insight into their struggles. Shabir, who grew up in the Middle East, says the confidence gap worries her most – something she didn't expect in America. She used an example of a young girl asking a mentor about how to get her parents to accept her passion to make games. "It was such an interesting choice of words because she has to convince her parents to allow her to become a game developer," Shabir says. "It's not as simple as, 'I like games. I want to make games. I'm going to do it.' You have to convince your family, your peers, and you have to convince yourself, and there's so much self-doubt at that age. That's why programs like Girls Make Games are important, because when they go to camp, they feel so validated in who they are."



Anyone can come to Pixelles, regardless of gender or age

Shabir works with the next generation of women gamers

Laila Shabir, founder of Girls Make Games

PIXELLES
Empowering more women to become game makers
Workshops, industry mentoring, socials, and more!
Nous donnons les m
plus de femmes de
des créatices de jeu
Des ateliers, du mentorat pr
des activités sociales et plus

Shannon Studstill
Sony Santa Monica

Angie Smets
Guerrilla Games

Providing Resources And Preparing For The Challenges

Shabir is hardly the only one giving young women a way to explore their interests in tech. The industry as a whole is working to help make the transition into video games much smoother with more programs and mentorships than ever before. The most telling thing about most of these organizations is many started as a one-off program, but then grew into something much larger after seeing the need for fostering untapped talent interested in the video game industry.

That's how it was for Pixelles, a nonprofit organization located in Montreal that gives women the tools to make their first game. Pixelles has been going for five years, but when it first called on women for its Game Incubator program, the response was larger than ever expected, with 65 applications for a mere 10 spots. "That sent us a clear message of, 'Hey, women want to make video games!' recalls co-founder and director Rebecca Cohen-Palacios, who also works as a UI Developer at Ubisoft Montreal. "Over the course of the incubator, after speaking with participants, [we discovered] there was also a need for a space for women-in-games."

This led to the organization expanding to create additional programs focusing on writing and mentorship, alongside a GDC scholarship program. Pixelles also hosts free monthly workshops and special events with the activities open to anyone of any gender.

With misconceptions about the field and hobby all around (see Changing Perceptions sidebar), many women have taken up the cause of reaching our younger generation to educate them on the opportunities that exist in the video game space. Guerrilla Games' executive producer Angie Smets has been with the company for the past 17 years and, because of the studio's diverse and friendly environment, didn't realize the trouble women were experiencing around the world. "I always felt like my gender didn't matter," she says. "I could have been a boy and I think I would have the same career path."

However, in recent years after chatting with other female senior developers and seeing an increase in hostility, she realized there was more she could do. Now she spends her time going to schools in the Netherlands (the location of Guerrilla's studio) to discuss the process and give them a better idea of the career opportunities, especially in the triple-A space. "Eighty percent of these students would often be male, but they would also see a woman who works in games," she says. "I think it also instills the image of it being normal that women make games." To Smets, one of the most exciting things is seeing the percentage of women at the schools who want to go into the field increase, saying it's getting closer to one-third of them.

Similarly, U.K.-based Media Molecule coordinates with classrooms in the area for kids to see the behind-the-scenes process of a game being made. "I am very happy to say yes to school groups all of the time," says co-founder and studio director Siobhan Reddy. She's made this visit more interdisciplinary, so students see creating a game goes beyond just programming and into areas such as composing. "We've been talking about how to go younger because the rhyme is, 'year eight is too late,'" Reddy says. "By then, young women have already been put off, so we have to get in earlier. We need to show at the primary school age what's possible."

Shannon Studstill, head of Santa Monica Studios and VP of product development, thinks while we're seeing improvement, we still have a lot of work to do. "The opportunities that exist in the industry... I don't think the awareness is as good as it could be," Studstill says. "There's a plethora of opportunities in gaming, it's an exciting environment, and it's creative, and it's not an all-boys' club experience. How well are we really getting that out there, so women consider it as a career opportunity?"

Studstill makes a good point, and it's why women are trying to break that stereotype by showing people first-hand their role in the industry.

Changing Perceptions

Although the gender divide between female and male gamers is getting closer to 50/50, men are still often seen as the target demographic both by publishers and the consuming audience. Stereotypes dominate our culture, from gamers being seen as "lazy" and "living in their parents' basements" to it being a hobby purely for men. These depictions haven't helped anyone – male or female – but the lack of visible women in the game space hasn't helped showcase it as a diverse hobby. "I think there are a lot of preconceptions of what a gamer is today and who that should be," says Facebook head of global marketing and gaming Aoife Brodigan. "It's not just that women are playing mobile games these days. Some of the reports from NewsU show women are making up around 41 percent of those playing console games. [We need] to debunk the myths around who is actually playing games as a start."

Believe it or not, while gaming seems like a more mainstream activity these days, misconceptions about who plays them are still present. "I still hear women say that 'games are a guy thing,'" says Pixelles co-founder and director Rebecca Cohen-Palacios. "Making and playing games can be for everyone. That's still symptomatic of our 'games' culture, stereotypes that still persist, who we spotlight as game developers at public events/media and representation in games."

Robin Hunicke
Funomena

Increasing Visibility

A common issue facing the gaming industry is the visibility of women, but it's not like women aren't already in key development or leadership roles. The women interviewed in this piece are proof, but we still don't have many recognizable female auteurs like Todd Howard or Hideo Kojima. Getting more women to be recognized for their roles on stage is one step to fixing this.

"I think it's just a matter of making sure we are continually getting the women of the industry out there, making it known that we're available to help people and [answer] questions," says general manager of Microsoft Studios Publishing Shannon Loftis. Like Loftis, a lot of women in the industry have taken it as a call to action to be more present and available to speak at conferences. Why? Because providing role models is important. Girls need to see women in these roles to be able to envision themselves in similar positions. Girls Make Games brings in women developers to speak at the camp for this very reason; Shabir noted how uplifting it is for the young girls to see, saying it "makes the biggest impact more than any technological knowledge that we could impart."

GirlsBehindTheGames founders
Caroline Carter and Lisa Blakie

Almost every woman in development I spoke to discussed becoming more aware of this, striving to put themselves into the spotlight more. "It is important for female game developers to be vocal about their roles and careers," says Insomniac Games art director Jacinda Chew. "We can participate in interviews, write papers, and speak at schools and conferences to name a few examples. At the same time, women need to be offered more of these opportunities as well, so it's critical to actively recruit a diverse pool of subject matter experts when organizing events or news stories."

Reddy had always been around women in leadership roles and worked on diverse teams, so she hadn't really thought of the power she had by speaking at more events. "It took to the point of me really being pushed out into the spotlight that made me be reflective that I had kind of avoided being visible," Reddy says. "I hadn't realized how important it was to be visible and what kind of impact that would have." Reddy says it's led to more diverse people reaching out to visit the studio and realize the opportunities available.

With more women taking the stage, a pre-GDC event called Amplifying New Voices formed to help prepare them for the spotlight. ANV was started by a multitude of key women in leadership positions, such as Funomena's Robin Hunicke, Double Fine's Caryl Shaw, and Guerrilla Games' Angie Smets. "This trains the next generation of speakers," says Scavio, who also helped form the initaitive. "It gives them the confidence to go out and speak with authority when they're on stage," Hunicke adds. "A lot of the labor that we ask young women, women of color, and queer folks to do right now like being on panels, we're asking them to do it without preparation." Right now, ANV is currently fundraising to expand the program to include paid mentors in the coming year.

Plenty of other initiatives also support visibility, with two recent ones making waves. GirlsBehindTheGames was created by team members at Runaway, a studio that creates mobile and VR games. Runaway has a good ratio of men to women staff, so team members were shocked when they started breaking down statistics and realized that's not the case in most studios. "We all discussed as a team that we want to try and make a difference," says Runaway games marketer Caroline Carter.

While the studio is based in New Zealand, it wanted these conversations happening around the world, so the team took to Twitter to create GirlsBehindTheGames, and women used the eponymous hashtag to promote their work, offer mentorship, and answer questions. The discussion caught fire, with female developers from popular studios such as Telltale, Riot Games, BioWare, and Ubisoft chiming in. Even New Zealand's prime minister Jacinda Ardern created a video to support the cause. Since then, Runaway has let women in the industry take over the GirlsBehindTheGames Twitter account, allowing them to use the account for a day to answer questions and explain the work they do.

Similarly, Facebook's Women in Gaming, launched this past February, features interviews with women in various roles in the industry, covering everything from the media to development. Right now, they have 20 stories, but their goal is to get up to 100 by the end of the year. They started the hashtag #SheTalksGames to bring awareness to the career opportunities available in the industry and also the diversity of the people. "Our mission was to really champion diversity in the games industry, encouraging more women into the industry and leadership positions, and to really partner with others and inspire change," says Facebook head of global marketing and gaming Aoife Brodigan.

So far, Brodigan has been impressed with the support this initiative has received. "We've been really overwhelmed by the response, it's been incredible to see the companies and people really stepping forward, not just women, but men also wanting to support and be involved," she says. "[Men] can be true allies to women in the industry."

(Continued on page 17)

Importance Of Well-Developed Characters

While discussing expanding women's presence in the industry, it was only a matter of time before the conversation turned to the actual content of games. One priority is creating better characters and targeting more than just a single audience.

"Content-wise the industry is changing," says Xbox brand manager Nicole Fawcette. "For a long time, it felt like there was nothing for girls to latch onto." Having good role models in games is powerful, and many spoke to their excitement of seeing this improve, pointing to Lara Croft's redesign, Uncharted's female-led The Lost Legacy, and Overwatch's diverse and numerous women. "I think it's also about giving boys a different role model," says Guerrilla Games executive producer Angie Smets. "What I also really like about Horizon is we also have less stereotypical male characters." She spoke to Horizon's Rost being a more caring and nurturing male character, and says she loves that her son can also grow up with a strong woman like Aloy and see it as the norm.

Insomniac Games art director Jacinda Chew shared her own story about being inspired by Jane Jensen's Gabriel Knight series. She was thrilled to see a recurring character: Grace Nakimura. [She's] a smart Asian woman who was Gabriel Knight's equal partner," she explains. "It is really important that women see that they are represented – whether it's including more female characters in games or being more visible in the industry. It never occurred to me that I couldn't work in games because I had seen another woman do it. Because of this realization, I've started to put myself out there more in the hopes that future generations will see me and realize that they can do it too."

GirlsBehindTheGames with New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern

41% of US gamers are female
13% of UK gamers are female
Source: UKIE 2017
Writer Kate Russell speaks about sterotypes female gamers face

Meggan Scavio
Academy of
Interactive
Arts & Sciences

Siobhan Reddy
Media Molecule

Jacinda Chew
Insomniac Games

Shannon Loftis
Microsoft

Nicole Fawcette
Microsoft

Tanya X. Short
Kitfox Games,
Pixelles

Women finding each other through 1,000 Dreams (see Supporting Women Streamers sidebar)

WOMEN IN GAMING
PRESENTED BY XBOX × UBISOFT

As part of International Women's Day, Ubisoft and Microsoft teamed up for a panel

Mentorship is important when learning all sides to game development

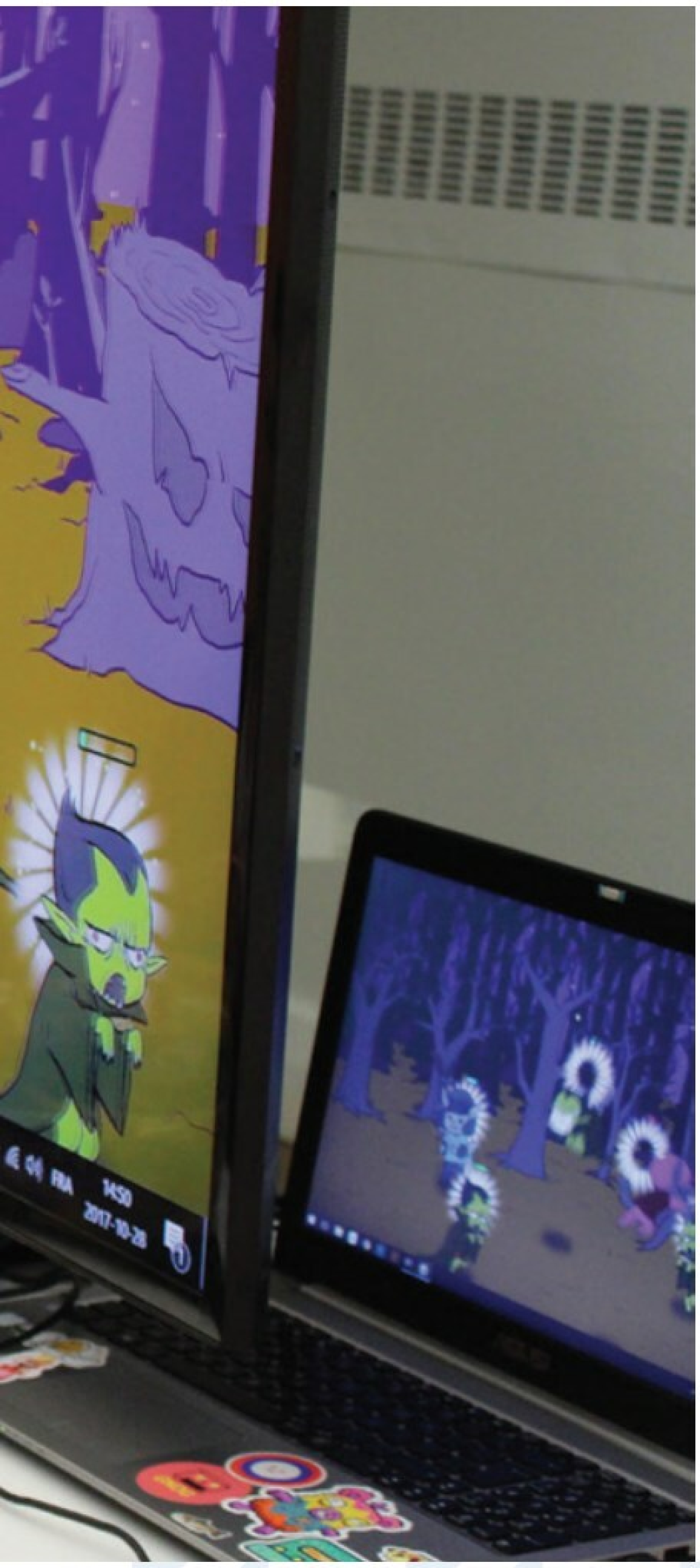
Pixelles helps newcomers get their feet off the ground by providing support for their first projects

(Continued from page 14)

Having The Tough Conversations

It would be disingenuous to bypass the tougher conversations that need to happen about women in the industry and their role in tech moving forward. As more women enter the workplace and advance their careers, companies must strive for better solutions to festering problems. In addition to a lack of women in leadership positions, retention rates are low for women in tech. Numerous factors contribute to this, from women not seeing room for advancement to the workplace not being as female-friendly as it could be. Sadly, there is no easy solution.

"We're making progress," MacLean says, who is coming up on her 26th year in the industry. "We're tracking diversity numbers, which we didn't use to do before. We're having open conversations about diversity and inclusivity. We talk a lot about why it matters, and we have a much better appreciation of how important women are as an audience of game players. But at the same time, the progress we're making is not fast enough." MacLean spoke to a recent U.K. gender pay gap report as an example. "Any industry where women routinely make 80 percent or less of what a man makes is not okay," she says.



Thankfully, action is afoot. Many women spoke to a variety of ways to improve the current state of things. "We have so many challenges and so many things going against us," Shabir says. "The workplace was designed by men for men for the longest time and now we're coming in and questioning the status quo and changing things. Not enough is changing fast enough and people are just sick of it. Women in the workplace need to step up and share what would make the workplace better."

Microsoft's Women in Gaming initiative, which has been around for 18 years, has expanded its role in recent years to tackle the problems outlined in this feature. Nicole Fawcette, an Xbox senior brand manager, stresses that anyone can come to these events from anywhere in the industry, even direct competitors. "We need to support one another, not compete against each other," she says. They hope to attract more women and young girls to the industry, holding events such as The Woman's Rally at GDC and working with organizations like Girls Make Games and Girls Who Code. To help with retention internally, they offer leadership training and networking events.

The industry has seen some dark times with a few unpleasant events and issues bubbling to the surface, from sexism to hate mobs, but there has also been a push for the industry to change. Loftis has noticed the clouds beginning to clear. "I've seen really interesting things come out of [those trying times]," she says. "There are more networks, more conversations, and more groups that are explicitly focused on diversity, not just gender diversity, but diversity all up. It feels now, while there are still problems, no question, the focus on the value of diverse voices in the industry is openly discussed and acted upon, which I don't think would be possible if we didn't have a terrible couple of years."

Cohen-Palcios agrees we need to keep this conversation going for improvement to emerge. "By continuing to have these conversations and shifting games culture, we can move even faster, especially in collaboration with local organizations that have the power to directly and effectively impact communities," she says. "We shouldn't snub the small changes or tiny grassroots initiatives either, because even those can have life-changing ripple effects."

It may not seem like much, but even just being more mindful of these issues is key to solving them. "It's easy to get discouraged when we see such a big problem, but we each have the power to positively influence the people around us," says Pixelles co-founder and director Tanya X. Short. "Signal boost the women doing good work. Have gentle, awkward conversations with the friends and acquaintances about problematic words and actions they might be taking. Take responsibility for the impact you have on the world, and just keep working to make it a little bit better, day by day." ◆

Supporting Women Streamers

Video game streaming has exploded in the last few years thanks to the popularity of platforms like Twitch and YouTube. People can make a lucrative career in streaming video games, affording many the opportunity to make it their full-time job. Streaming is another segment dominated by men. According to a 2016 study, women only made up 35 percent of streamers. To change this, Twitch partnered with 1,000 Dreams, a female-focused scholarship organization, for a charity event. After seeing the success, they formed the BroadcastHER grant to help up-and-coming female Twitch talent with expenses. So far the organization has raised nearly $45,000.

"I love the idea that we are 'investing' in the futures of the young women we fund and serve – and my goal from day one is being totally transparent with our supporters on who these funds are going to and how many women we have so far funded," says founder and CEO Christie Garton. "That is why you can read each and every one of our girl's stories on our website. I am watching a 1,000 Dreams community take shape as a result. It's inspiring – and motivates me daily to strive for our goal of a 1,000 funded girls and more over time."

Streamer Tina "ShadowFoxx086" Degenhart raised over $5,000 for 1,000 Dreams and enjoyed the experience overall. "I was given the chance to meet some amazing and extremely supportive people in the gaming community," she says. "I connected with other like-minded women who also participated in the charity and it's really given me a huge boost in confidence as a streamer."

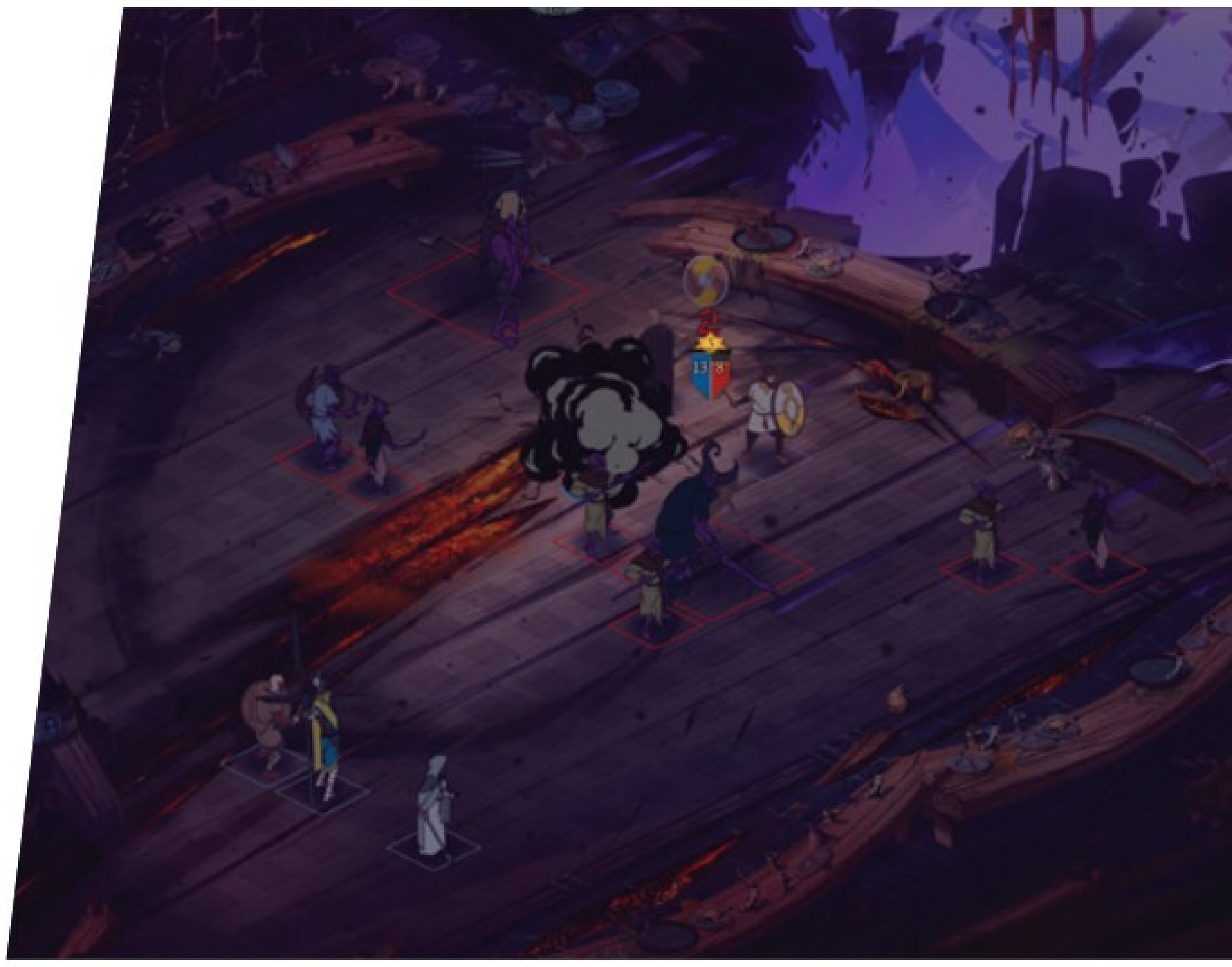
TAKING A TURN

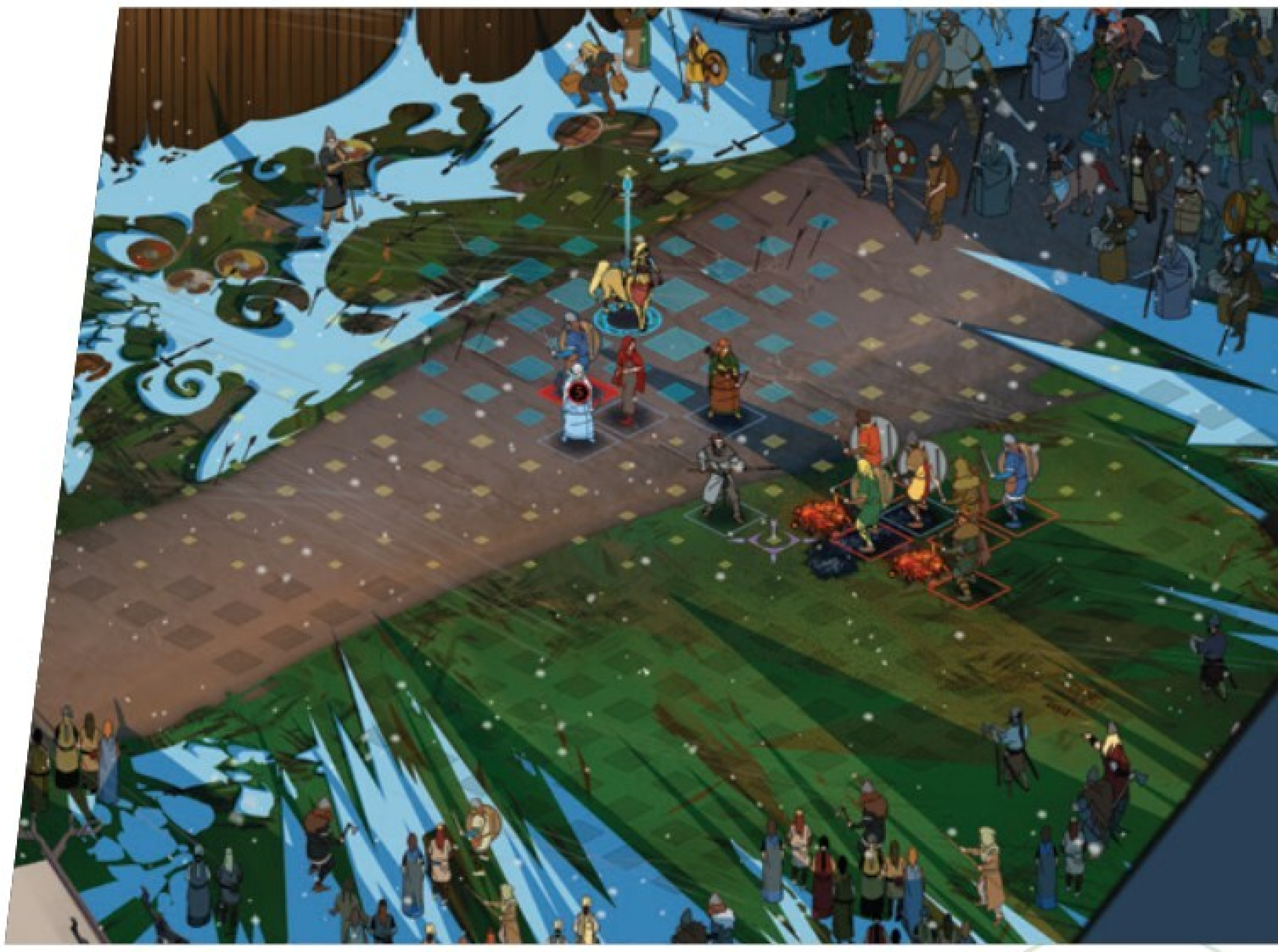
We explore the surprisingly rich slate of upcoming turn-based tactical strategy games

by Game Informer Staff

The turn-based tactical strategy revival has been going strong for years now, with impressive games like The Banner Saga, Firaxis' XCOM reboot, and the Shadowrun Returns series. The genre continues to evolve as developers incorporate more role-playing elements and venture into new thematic territory.

With Subset Games' fantastic Into the Breach, 2018 is already off to a hot start for turn-based tactics fans, and it's only going to get better from here out. Take a look at several of the interesting titles scheduled to hit in 2018 that promise to shake up the genre in new ways.





THE BANNER SAGA 3

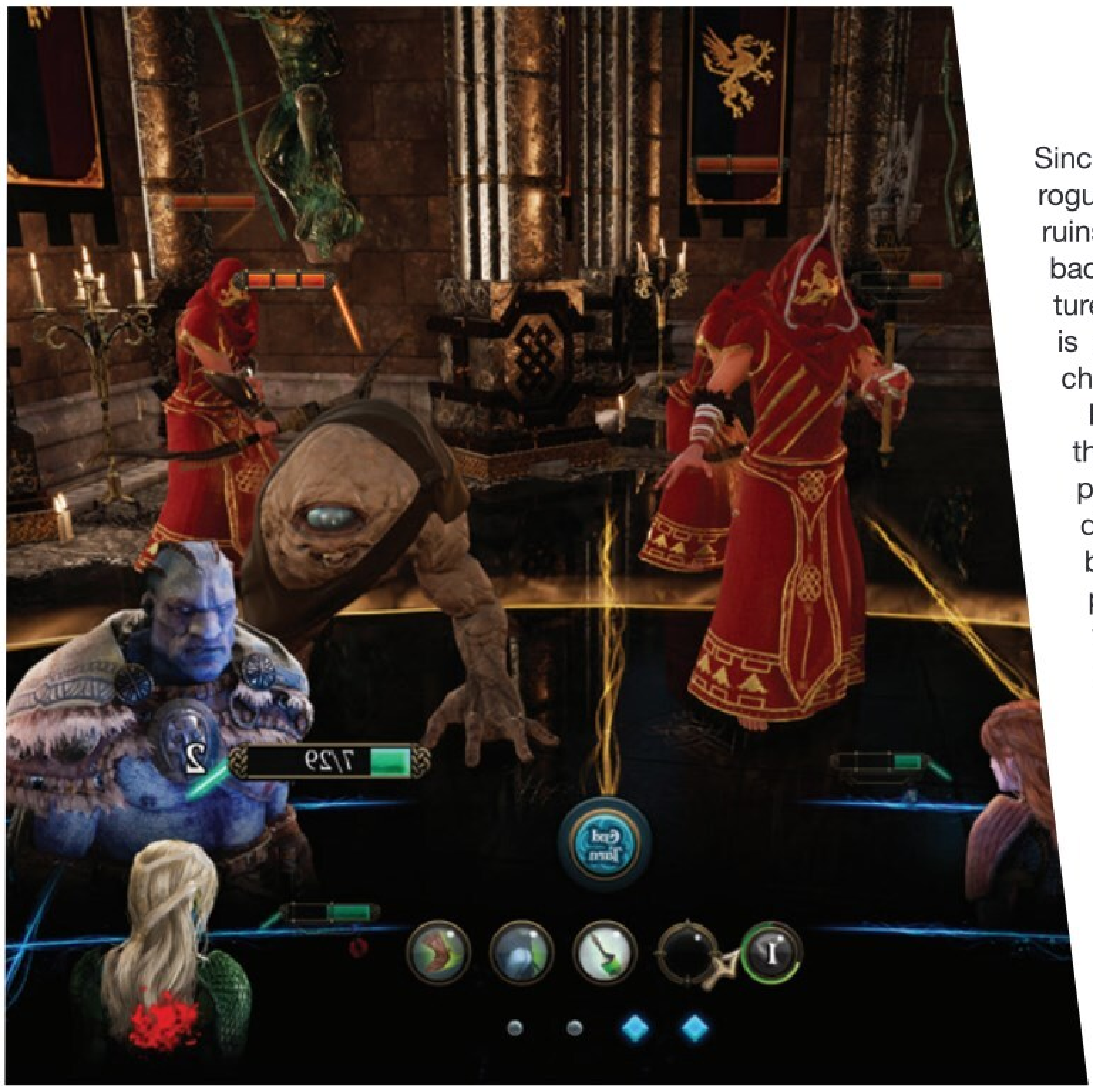
Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Stoic Games returns for an epic culmination of its Viking adventure. After seeing their homeland slowly succumbing to The Darkness for two games, two caravans of Nordic fighters are the last hope for civilization. While one tries to fend off the Dredge at the last bastion of humanity, the walled city of Arberrang, another unsteady alliance ventures deep into the mysterious dark realm hoping to put an end to the invasion. The two fronts present dramatically different tactical challenges for players.

In Arberrang, you must make tough decisions and keep the Dredge at bay while trying to buy your other caravan time. The city is surrounded by the Dredge, with the darkness creeping closer and closer each chapter of the story. This caravan won't be journeying out of the city during the course of this game; instead, they must dig in their heels and get ready to defend the city at all costs while trying to avoid the infighting that has a tendency to break out when the outlook is this bleak. Based on your decisions, the city will change dynamically. Perhaps people will revolt and start fires within your walls, burning down important districts.

In The Darkness, waves of challengers test your mettle as you journey further into the abyss in hopes of finding a way to squelch the invasion once and for all. Though you can always turn tail and run during these battles, standing your ground for a couple waves is the only way to procure better gear for your resource-starved party. During these wave battles, the Valka spear that Ivan received at the end of Banner Saga 2 comes in handy. The spear fills with up to three charges players can use to unleash a chain-lightning attack.

Look for The Banner Saga 3 this summer.



THE BARD'S TALE IV

Platform: PC

Since the mid-'80s, players have been forming groups of bards, rogues, fighters, and more to roam around the towns, dungeons, and ruins of the Bard's Tale series. In 2018, players have a chance to go back to the monster-besieged city of Skara Brae for a new adventure and a new play style from inXile Entertainment. While the game is still rooted in turn-based party management, the gameplay has changed dramatically.

Players draw from an action-point pool to control and command their team on a grid. One turn you may have to spend a bunch of points on your tank to control positioning and prepare for incoming damage. On another, you might want to focus on using your mage's big damage spells now that the enemies are able to take massive punishment from an area-of-effect burst. Or hey, maybe you just want to spend some actions getting your bard drunk, ready to belt out a ballad alongside a doozy of a punch. Managing your points and position each turn is critical to success, as well as keeping a careful eye on enemy actions – and interrupting dangerous spells and abilities.

In addition to the dungeon crawl, players also solve myriad puzzles – including special weapons and items that need to be unlocked to unleash their full potential. Tinkering with runes on the hilt of a sword or slaying a certain enemy may reveal hidden power.

Games have changed a lot since The Bard's Tale put PC gaming dungeon romps on the map. Players can delve back into the catacombs when this new take on the classic hits later this year.

MUTANT YEAR ZERO: ROAD TO EDEN

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC

For its first title, The Bearded Ladies are leveraging the team's Hitman roots to inject exploration and stealth into the turn-based tactics formula. Based on a popular Swedish pen-and-paper RPG from the '80s, Mutant Year Zero puts you in control of an anthropomorphic crew struggling to survive in the harsh post-apocalyptic environment.

The group this game follows live in a shantytown they call the Ark, which is built on top of a bridge. This base is home to The Elder, the only person old enough to have a connection to the world before the nuclear fallout. He doesn't tell too many stories about the past and doesn't want his people to venture out too far into the zone – a graveyard that expands the world beyond them. Unfortunately, they have to head into that dangerous land to address their lack of water, supplies, and food.

Real-time exploration allows you to scout these areas for vital resources and information about how the world ended up in such a bad way. It also gives you a chance to put yourself in the best position when the turn-based battles begin. Stealthily canvasing the area to know what you're up against (and perhaps finding advantageous defensive or offensive positions) is the key to surviving against the tough bandits. You can even split up the party to get your team in the best possible position before opening fire. During the gameplay sequence we watched, the group found a dormant mech in a bandit base and was able to reprogram it to attack anyone on sight when activated, which proved to be the deciding factor when the bullets started flying. Fail to take advantage of these tide-turning options and you could lose one of your vital team members if you're playing on one of the difficulty levels that enables permadeath.

Look for Mutant Year Zero later this year. The Bearded Ladies say they are considering bringing the game to Switch as well.

PHOENIX POINT

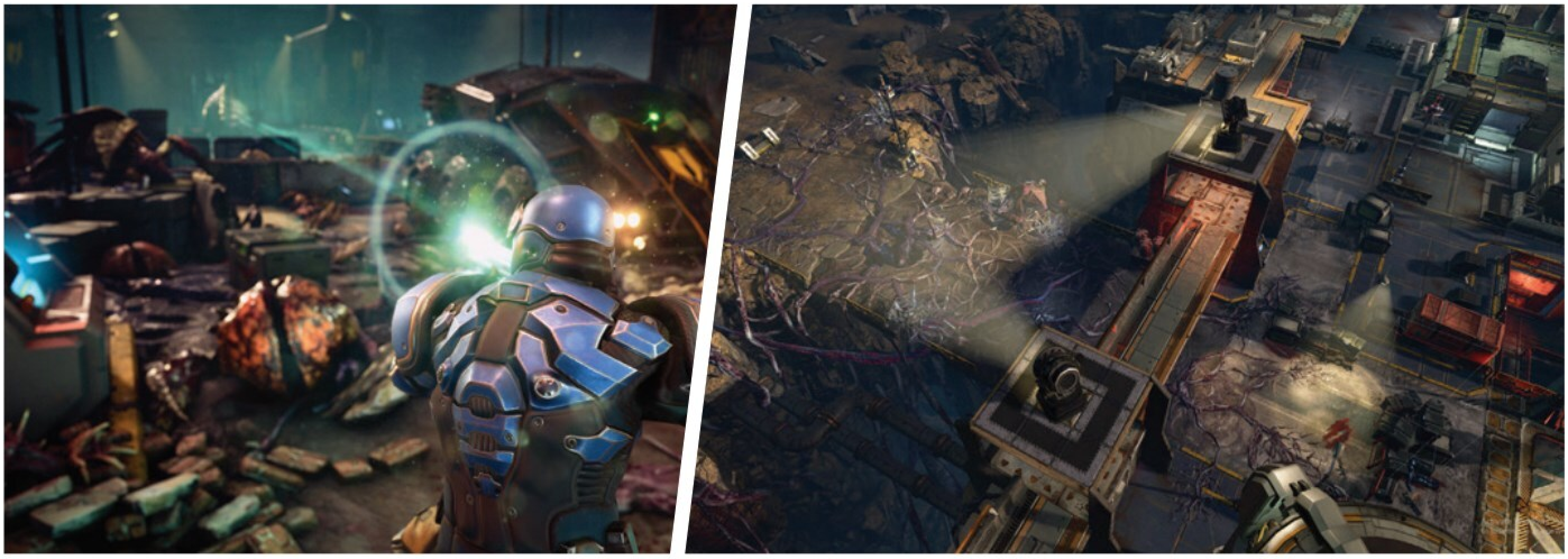
Platform: PC

XCOM godfather Julian Gollop is back with a spiritual successor that takes the genre in interesting and formidable new directions. The world is under siege by a dangerous virus unleashed by melting permafrost. The virus spread quickly, mutating everything it came into contact. To stave off extinction, humans create the Phoenix Project, a collection of civilization's best scientists, engineers, and soldiers. As the commander of this operation, you must go head to head with giant mutated monsters, politic to keep together a loose network of human factions, and scavenge for resources.

Fighting a varied assortment of mutant enemies forms the backbone of Phoenix Point, and anyone who's played XCOM will understand the basics. But Phoenix Point evolves the experience in several compelling ways. First, the game replaces dice rolls with a realistic ballistics system. Snapshot Games modeled bullet trajectory to take into account distance, velocity, and target availability. If you shoot a rifle head-on at an enemy holding a melee shield, chances are extremely high your bullets will be repelled by the shield. You're better off flanking before opening fire to guarantee damage. Destructible environments also give you the option of taking out cover if an enemy is entrenched behind a barrier.

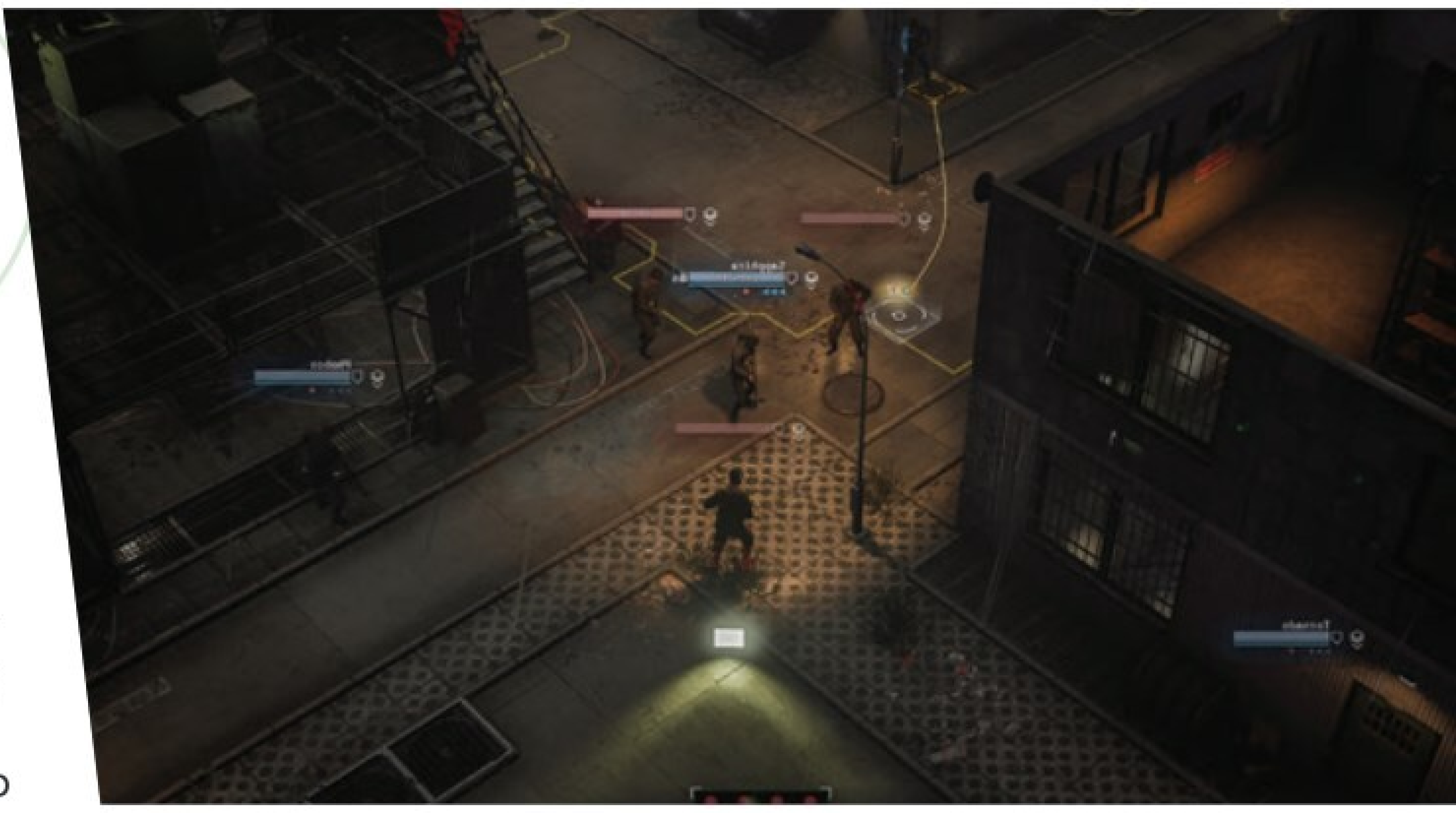
Whatever strategy you deploy during combat, over time the mutants will evolve natural counters, forcing you to continually adopt new approaches (or invest in research to find weak points on these newly formed armor shells). Location-based damage gives you a few other tactical decisions to consider in battle as well. Sometimes slowing a dangerous enemy can buy you that precious time to do some crowd control.

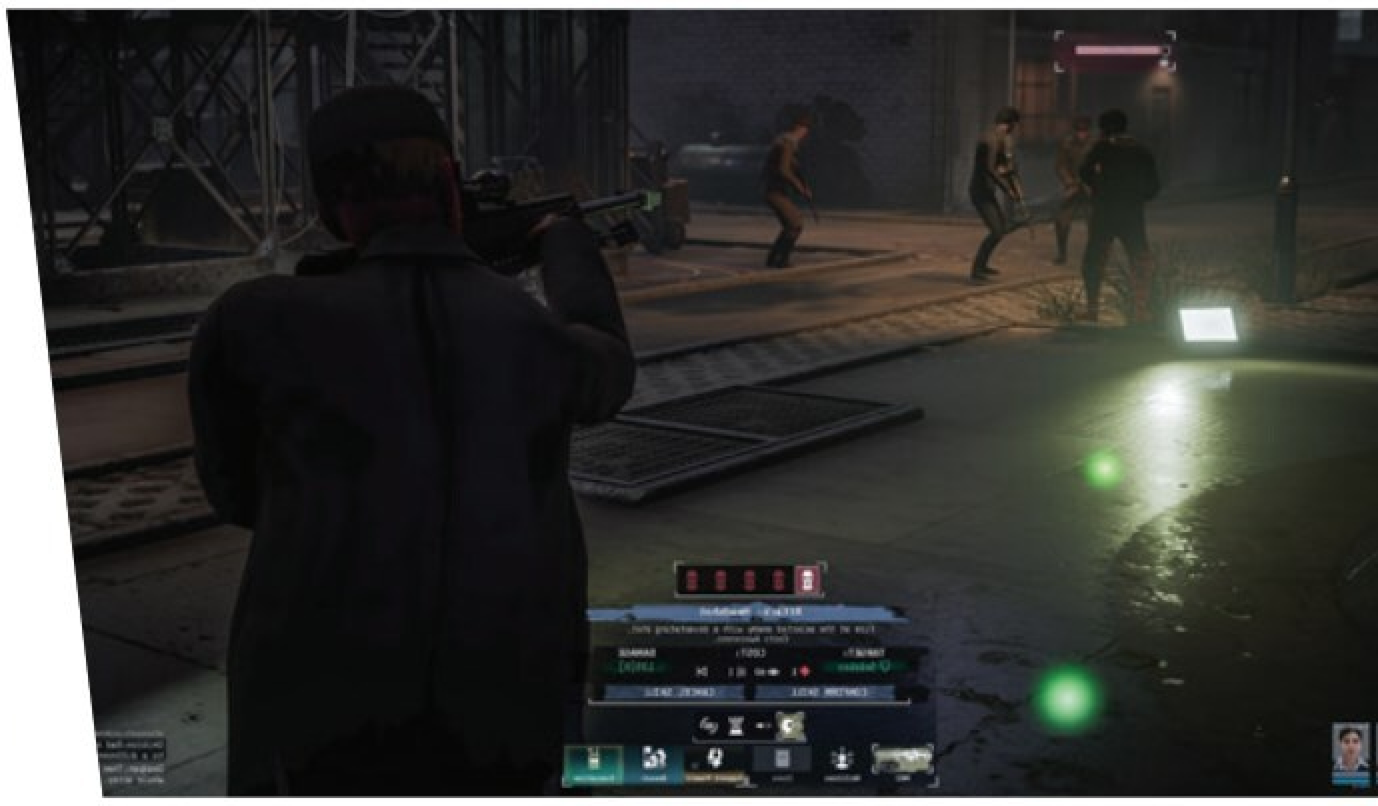
Phoenix Point is currently on track to release at the end of the year. Snapshot Games says it's interested in porting the game to console as well if they get the financial backing to do so.



PHANTOM DOCTRINE

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC





From developer CreativeForge Games, Phantom Doctrine could accurately be described as "XCOM during the Cold War." When you're outside the tactical turn-based combat missions, your main goal is to build and run a spy agency to execute global espionage missions. You start out as a tiny operation, only able to complete regional objectives, but as you upgrade your staff and your agency's capabilities, your stable of missions extends across the globe.

As your agents gain more experience, you can train them to become more adept at various skills. Every aspect of an agent's profile contributes to their success or failure on a mission. Does one of your agents speak French? They might be more successful at missions in French-speaking nations.

If you capture a rival spy during a mission, you can bring them back to perform various techniques on them. From interrogation to brainwashing and installing specific trigger words to make them flip at crucial points in the game, you have numerous MK-Ultra tactics at your disposal. Unfortunately, your A.I. rivals can do any of these techniques to your agents as well, meaning that you need to watch for potential brainwash victims if one of your spies comes back from a mission acting a little off. In addition, if you don't properly vet a new agent before hiring them, you could be welcoming a mole right into your organization.

Once you're in the tactical missions, gameplay feels much like those of XCOM. However, unlike XCOM you don't have to worry about the random number generator ruining your perfectly lined up shot. Instead, Phantom Doctrine operates on the assumption that all agents on the roster are highly trained spies who know how to shoot a gun. Instead of relying on dice rolls, Phantom Doctrine considers variables like awareness ratings, line-of-sight, distance, and weapon being used to determine if the shot is successful. In addition, missions can be completed stealthily.

Phantom Doctrine looks to please fans of both turn-based tactical combat and headquarters management when it launches later this year.

BALANCING ACT

We take a look at how developers strive to make sure multiplayer games are fair and fun for everyone

by Suriel Vazquez

For years, Adam Heart played fighting games competitively. He was no slouch, either; he did well enough to earn a top-eight medal in the Tatsunoko vs. Capcom tournament at the Evolution Championship Series in 2009. He dug deep into the games he played, learning and mastering techniques most casual players didn't even know existed. This history, he thought, gave him an eye for balancing competitive games, so he decided to make one. "I'm kind of knee-deep in this stuff, in a way that I think most developers are not, with a few exceptions," Heart says.

But imagine having to make sure every match between a fighting game's 20 or so characters is fair. Or tweaking the dozens of characters, items, and minute aspects of League of Legends to make sure one particular strategy doesn't dominate and make matches boring. It's a daunting task, one developers have been struggling with for years. While Heart has had success designing competitive games, he quickly realized that good multiplayer balancing is about much more than fairness.

Fun Reigns Supreme

When he first started working on Divekick (a simple two-button fighting game) and later the 2013 Killer Instinct reboot at Iron Galaxy, Heart thought balance was the most important part of a competitive game. “I was just like, ‘You want all the characters to be balanced, you want them all to be viable, right?’ That’s the dream,” he says.

But players have to like a game before it becomes a competition, which can often make balancing that fun with frustration more important than equity. Heart learned that if a particular move or tactic offers too much reward for relatively low risk, it can take over a game and be a problem “even if it’s a totally beatable, totally fair thing,” Heart says.

For Riot, the team working on the massively popular League of Legends, balance and variety go hand-in-hand. In League, champions are always part of a team, which means disparate strengths and weaknesses are not only fun, but vital.

“What we ideally want is that every champion [in League] has games where they’re the right pick, games where they’re an okay-but-not-great choice, and games where they’re probably the wrong choice,” says lead gameplay designer Andrei Van Roon. In that sense, balance in League of Legends is less about making sure every character is equally good and more about making sure every character is useful.

Heart also realized thinking about fairness too much can impede the actual design of the game. “You want to really explore the limits of the system, the rules you’ve created. You want to make something interesting and unique,” Heart says. ”You don’t want to bog yourself down with questions like [balance], because then you might not even try the cool thing you were going to try because it just might be too strong.”

When To Buff And When To Nerf

As he worked on Killer Instinct, Heart also realized the reason why certain kinds of characters lurk at the bottom of player-made power rankings: To keep a game healthy. "You can't let characters that are really disruptive be the best characters," he says.

Killer Instinct's second season introduced Kan-Ra, a powerful sorcerer with a combination of deployable traps and long-range throw moves. Kan-Ra was one of the strongest characters in the game at the time, since he was powerful and easy to use. "He played in a very unorthodox way, [one] that made you change the way that you fought him." Playing against an unconventional, powerful character frustrated much of the game's audience, so the team at Iron Galaxy had to tone him down.

Another common suggestion developers hear from players is to leave the stronger characters alone and only buff the weaker characters. This isn't healthy for a game either. "Always buffing champion damage eventually results in a situation where champion damage is too high across the board," Roon says. In League of Legends, this leads to towers, creeps, and other monsters being too weak. Make all those stronger, and you then need to balance items to compensate, and so on, leading to a game that feels vastly different and which may not fit the direction developers or players want the game to take.

The Right Patch At The Right Time

The competitive scene for games like Marvel vs. Capcom 2 and Super Smash Bros. Melee managed to survive for years without changes. On the upside, it meant players had one, crystallized version to master, spending less time adjusting to changes and more time improving. But it also meant the most powerful, unbalanced characters stayed that way.

With the ubiquity of patching, developers now have an unwritten mandate to update their games regularly. The challenge is figuring how often to do that. "It's a 'balance' between patching frequently enough to make sure we are reacting to community feedback and trends in a reasonable time, while not overcorrecting and making changes that aren't necessary," says Matthew Cooper, lead live designer for Heroes of the Storm.

Developers also have to contend with their community's culture as well. Heroes of the Storm fans are used to receiving frequent balance patches and get antsy if they go too long without one, but fighting game players are a bit more reticent. "Fighting gamers come from that arcade era, and they kind of want to let things rock for a while and see how it pans out," Heart says.

During Killer Instinct's early seasons, the team was patching the game about once a month, which was far too often. During that time, Street Fighter IV, the most popular fighting title, was patched about once a year. Heart thinks that wasn't frequent enough. "I think players need change more often than that to stay engaged and not feel like they have no answers or the answers aren't coming," he says. Toward the end of Killer Instinct's life cycle, Iron Galaxy was patching the game every three to four months, which Heart feels was a sweet spot.

Talking It Over

Along with improving and retooling their games, developers have also have to figure out how to communicate these changes. Because updates are often based on player feedback, developers need to communicate why and how they came to their conclusions.

With Overwatch, Blizzard knew from the outset it wanted to have a dialogue with its players. "We wanted to make sure we had a space to explain why a change was made as part of our updates' notes," says Overwatch principal game designer Geoff Goodman. In fact, the team often goes beyond explaining why they make certain changes to characters. "Sometimes, we will also talk about what's coming up in future patches on our forums if it is a hot topic in the community and we're already committed to making the change."

Communication isn't always easy, however. Although Capcom has been more proactive about updating Street Fighter V (it has received

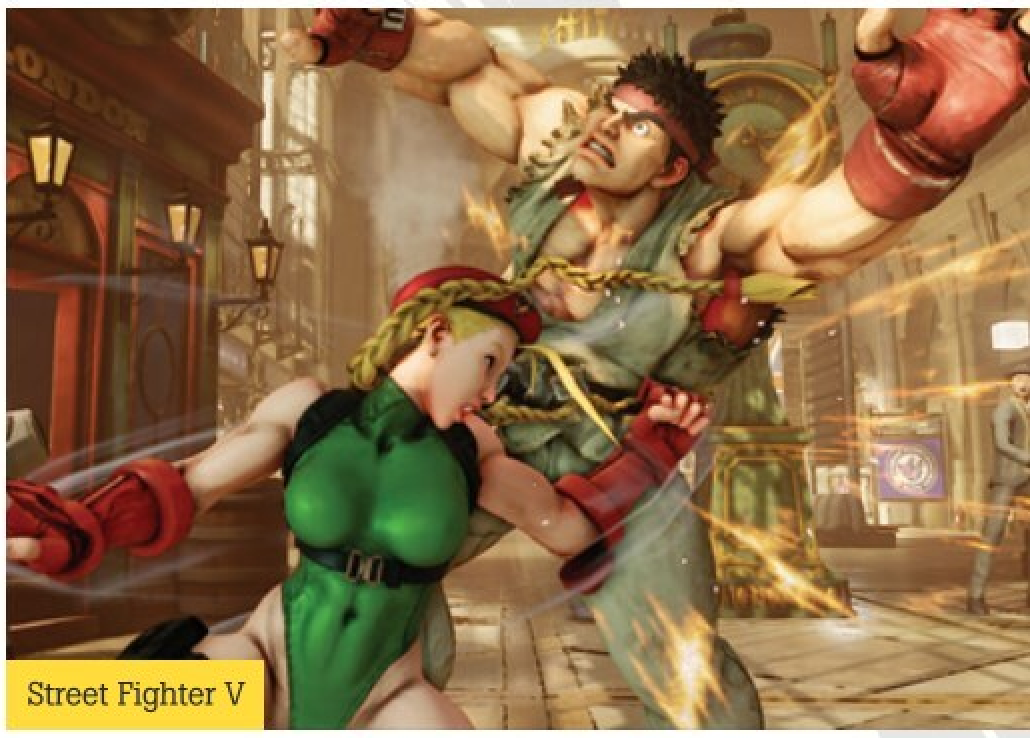
Riot recently reworked League of Legends' runes system, which the team felt didn't offer impactful decisions. The update took about a year to fully test and release

major patches twice this year already), the patch notes themselves have left players wanting. Their latest patch notes used vague phrases like "eased the combo count" to detail important changes, and had short explanations that were quickly removed but not replaced. This left players scratching their heads as to why prominent, strong characters had been buffed while weaker ones had been nerfed, leading to frustration in the community.

Throughout the life of Killer Instinct, Heart and the team at Iron Galaxy gave players plenty of context for why they made changes to certain characters. Killer Instinct's patch notes were meticulously detailed, laying out exactly what had changed. "I was very active on Twitter, answering people's questions," Heart says. This, he believes, is important to keeping players engaged with a game they feel belongs to them. "Even if people disagree with the direction you're going, they can at least get context as to why you did a thing so it doesn't seem random to them."

Heart kept a list of tournament dates to help the team know when to release patches

Heroes of the Storm


Street Fighter V

Taking It All In Stride

The second a patch is out, players will talk about it. With Twitter, Reddit, and all other kinds of sources to pull from, developers have more feedback than ever to sift through. The echo chamber of social media can lead to a snowballing effect; a few prominent players complaining about a character or weapon being too strong can catch on with the community, creating narratives about a game's balance that, regardless of whether they're true, become hard to overturn.

In the face of these narratives, developers need to dig deeper. According to Heart, players usually focus on symptoms of a problem, not their cause. "We're not looking to patch the symptoms out, because then the problem is still there, and it's just going to lead to more complaints," he says. Instead, developers have to peel back the layers of their games and address the root issues at hand. This can lead to patches which address few of the issues players complain about directly, but ultimately improve the game in ways that make those issues less impactful.

Another important question developers face is who they should listen to. With over 20 million players, Overwatch has players of all skill levels, and different issues plague different skill brackets. Goodman says that before Blizzard recently made changes to her toolkit, D.Va was seen as too strong by pro players, but too weak by lower-skilled players. "In this case, we took some power away from what was making her feel this way at the high level, her Defense Matrix, and gave her a new ability that gives her more options in how she can be played and hopefully make her more fun for all players," Goodman says.

That balance between tweaking for low and high-skill players is part of why Iron Galaxy made it a point to balance on the scales of fun-versus-frustration and risk-versus-reward. "Frustration is almost never a factor at the top level," Heart says. "Top-level players just deal with stuff." Lower-level players, however, are more likely to quit playing completely if they encounter a frustrating obstacle.

When it comes to making sure a game is fair, however, developers can only hope to make sure that's the case at a high level. "[Low-level players] aren't yet playing the real game," Heart says. "So anything you do change is not going to affect them in the way you intend, because they're not really playing the whole game."

Patching Things Up

As players begin digesting changes and retooling and developing strategies, developers are quick to begin work on the next patch. Sometimes, these patches consist of tweaks that serve to keep the game in check. Other times, they introduce new characters, rework older ones, or make sweeping changes to various aspects of the game.

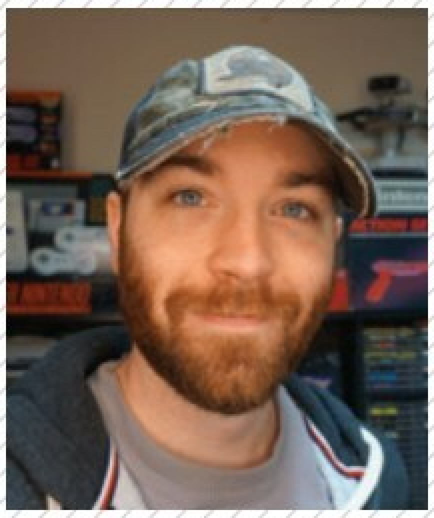
When making changes this drastic, developers try out lots of ideas that may seem cool, but ultimately don't make the cut. "There have been many things we have tried and play tested but didn't make the cut to even get to the [public test server]," Goodman says. "As one example, there was a time where we were testing out some potential Orisa changes and tested out a change where while Fortify was active, she couldn't fall below 1 health. This was pretty fun and interesting, but ran into a few problems like confusing the optimal usage of the ability. Currently, it's best used before you take a lot of damage, while this bonus effect it made it feel more correct to use it when you were almost dead."

Once the team is confident about both the changes they've made and the stability of the patch, they may choose to release in a public beta phase, something more developers have done at earlier stages of development. Blizzard's Overwatch team, for example, releases most major changes to their public test realm up to a month before letting them enter the main client, allowing players to offer feedback on major changes, and creating a livelier conversation between players and developers about where their game should head.

Chasing A Perfect Endgame

Keeping every player satisfied forever is ultimately impossible. For seasoned competitors-turned-developers like Heart, fairness might be the end-all-be-all, but developers have known for years that balance is a moving target, susceptible to the whims of high-level players, cultural trends, and an evolving metagame. And even if a game is balanced, it can grow stale with age, making it boring even if it's fair.

That's why most modern multiplayer games continually update, evolve, and improve, making sure that if even a game isn't perfectly balanced, players care enough about it to complain. "We're not under any illusions that one day we're going to look at our forums and see everyone agreeing that everything is balanced," Goodman says. "But I feel like if we logged in one day and saw everyone complaining about the balance of different things, we would be in a good spot." ◆



Breaking Gaming's Boundaries

Seeing how games are put together by ripping them apart

While looking for a way to use a computer mouse to play Wii games, Derek stumbled onto "freecam" programs that allow users to manipulate a game's camera however they wish, letting them see the kinds of sleight-of-hand tricks developers pull on players behind the scenes. After seeing that few were showcasing the tech online, he made a video using a freecam on the Wii version of Punch-Out!! The video took off, launching the Boundary Break series and allowing Derek to quit his cush-but-unrewarding office job to peek behind the curtains of video games full-time.

Name:
Derek "Shesez"

Location:
Massachusetts

Career:
Online Entertainer

YouTube:
Shesez

Twitter:
BoundaryBreak

interview by Suriel Vazquez

How difficult was it to get your first freecam up and running?
I wouldn't say it was all that difficult. Emulation software is meant to be accessible to the general public, so that was easy to start. It wasn't until I started doing the show more and more that I had to learn more about video games as a whole. If you watch my earlier stuff, it's very basic-level stuff. I didn't know what people wanted to see out of something like this. As I did more episodes, I got more feedback from fans, which eventually led to a series that's mostly based in trying to teach you something but at the same time hold a level of entertainment.

Do you feel like you have a better working knowledge of games as a result of the series?
Oh, absolutely. I would never try to speak on behalf of a game developer; I think they'll always know more than me. But it's without a doubt that three years ago, I knew a lot less about video games than I do today. [Things like] level-of-detail, things that are off in the distance. When you start to go over there, you start to see that developers save a ton of resources by making the geometry of off-in-the-distance areas very low quality. Games that tend to not [run] as well tend to put more detail off in the background.

Are there episodes you couldn't do because you couldn't figure out the freecam?
Super Mario Odyssey and Gears of War are two personal choices of mine that I'd really want to see. They are currently not possible because there isn't much of a community that supports Xbox games past their initial releases. And with Mario Odyssey, the Switch hardware is unfortunately too new to develop tools for. But progress [on that] is exceptionally fast compared to previous generations.

You use emulation as part of your workflow. Do you worry about the legal implications of that?
I do worry about that. I try to avoid talking about the process [of getting a freecam to work] for the benefit of the publishers. I found that this method that I've been doing has managed to get a silent respect from certain publishers. Because I never mention how to do these things [in my videos], I think I've been absolved from any legal troubles because I try to respect the companies and try to promote actual game sales.

Do you feel financially secure with YouTube as a career?
I feel financially secure now. When I started off it was very scary. January and February are the worst months for making money off YouTube because advertisers don't invest in ads until March, and I started in January. That was a scary time. But a year later, January and February are totally fine. I still make more money doing YouTube than I did at my previous office job, which was not paltry.

You often partner with other people for footage and certain cameras. How do those collaborations play out?
Generally speaking, people are just really nice as far as the hacking community goes. They're very willing to work with me or make something for me. It doesn't usually involve compensation. Certainly, if anyone wanted compensation, we'd have that talk. But as far as my experience goes, everyone's more than willing to just work with me and accept credit. I make it a point to always mention the people behind these tools, because before the show, the people who made mods or hacks, generally speaking, never got celebration for what they do, and I've always thought that to be odd. So I always mention the people behind these tools that are necessary to make these things possible.

You've recently branched off into examining Flash animations. Are there any other mediums you'd be interested in covering?
One thing I would love to do is movies. Obviously, I'd have to get to a certain point where people would have to reach out to me because I could never just go behind the scenes of a film set. But that would be the end goal.

NINTENDO
SWITCH
HYRULE WARRIORS
DEFINITIVE EDITION
AVAILABLE NOW

TAKE DOWN ENEMY HORDES.
WHEREVER YOU WANT.

TEEN
T
ESRB
Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes

Game and system sold separately.

© Nintendo © KOEI TECMO GAMES CO., LTD. All rights reserved. The KT logo is a registered trademark of KOEI TECMO HOLDINGS CO., LTD. Nintendo Switch is a trademark of Nintendo. © 2018 Nintendo.

Produced by Force
Team NINJA

NINTENDO
SWITCH

Nintendo

The Good

SPYRO is back in the Reignited Trilogy (PlayStation 4/Xbox One) on September 21. The game contains Spryo the Dragon, Spyro 2: Ripto's Rage!, and Spyro: Year of the Dragon. Developed by Skylanders creator Toys For Bob, these titles are augmented with revamped graphics, full analog-stick controls, new orb challenges, and more.

The Bad

Sales-tracking data service **STEAMSPY** was forced to alter its model due to changes by Valve in Steam's privacy settings, impacting the accuracy of important sales data from developers in regards to their product and those of their competitors.

Updating last month's story about the fall of **BILLY MITCHELL**, arcade high-score keepers Twin Galaxies have removed all of Mitchell's scores and banned him from submitting future competitive ones. The organization, which is affiliated with the Guinness World Records, determined that some of Mitchell's scores – including one featured in the King of Kong documentary – were made on a modified arcade cabinet. Due to Mitchell's punishment, Steve Wiebe – Mitchell's foil as portrayed in the film King of Kong – is now officially recognized as Donkey Kong's first million-point player.

Mitchell says he is currently gathering evidence to prove that his scores did indeed follow the official guidelines.

The Ugly

Quotable

"We'll be the first to admit that Kai'Sa's neckline didn't land well with players and that it made her look unnecessarily sexualized, even if that wasn't the intention."

Ryan Mireles, League of Legends lead producer. Mireles went on to say that the overall goal with Kai'Sa's design was to make her look more human rather than "a monstrosity created by the Void."

NINTENDO SWITCH
Wolfenstein II
THE NEW COLOSSUS™
AVAILABLE JUNE 29TH
FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.
WHENEVER YOU WANT.

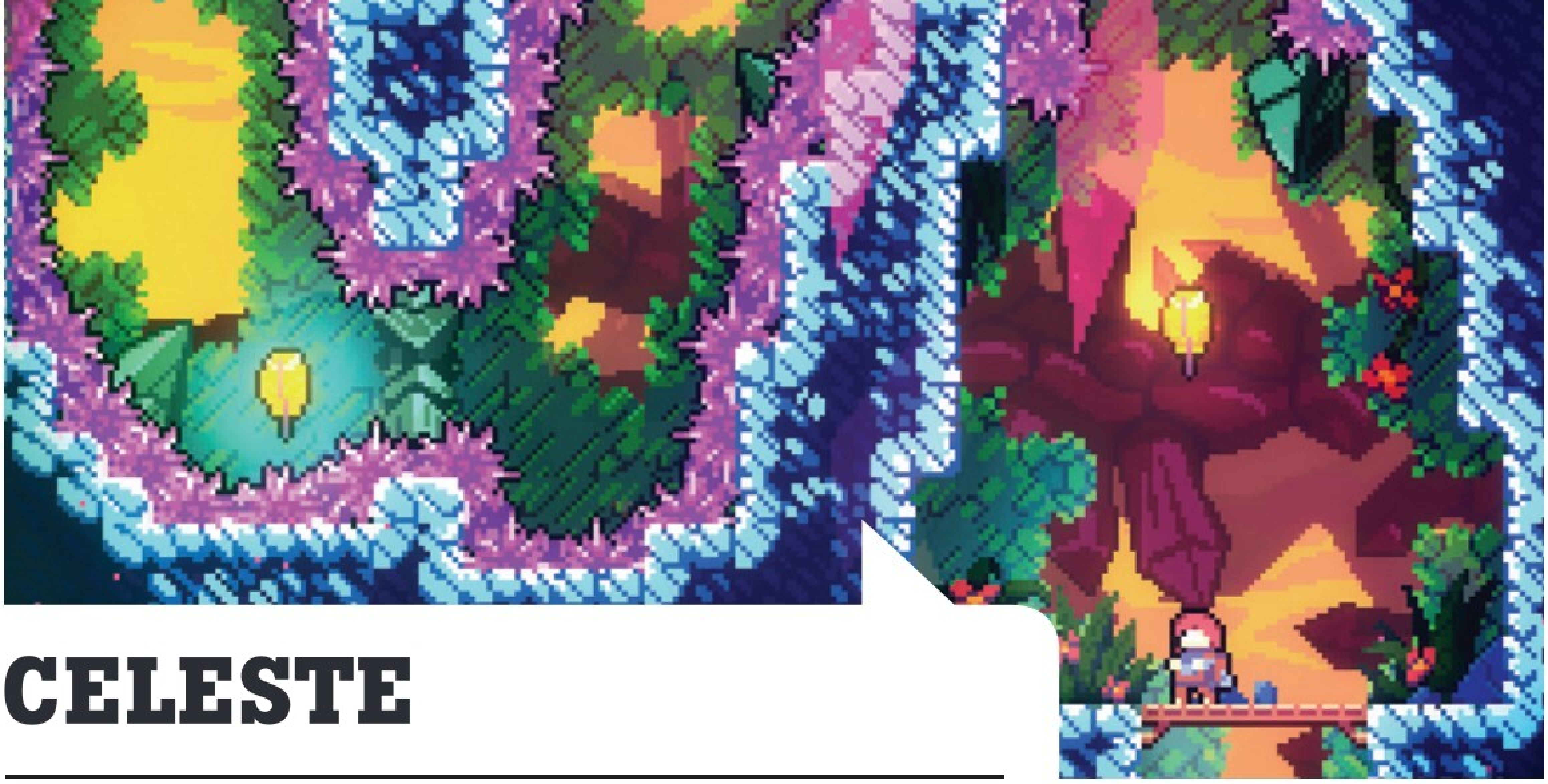
MATURE 17+
M
ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Partial Nudity
Sexual Content
Strong Language
Use of Drugs

Internet download required for Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus. microSD card may be required. Games, system and microSD card sold separately.

© 2017 Bethesda Softworks LLC, a ZeniMax Media company. All Rights Reserved. Nintendo Switch is a trademark of Nintendo. © 2018 Nintendo.

Bethesda

Nintendo®



CELESTE

After the release of TowerFall, developer Matt Thorson teamed up with his roommate, Noel Berry, for a game-jam project that quickly gained a fan following. That concept eventually evolved into Celeste – one of 2018's early indie hits and a classic platformer with a lot of inventive mechanics. Thorson and Berry shared their story with us, and talked about how many times they had to fail to get things right.

by Ben Reeves

Moving from TowerFall to Celeste seems like an interesting pivot. What was your experience moving from a frantic multiplayer game to a story-focused, single-player platformer?
Thorsen: TowerFall is a party game, right? It's about having fun with your friends. In my eyes, it feels like an extroverted game, and we just wanted to do a 180 and do a more introverted, inward-looking game. That naturally led us to single-player.

We know Celeste started out as a game-jam idea. When did you guys realize it was more than just an experimental project?
Berry: I think it was like three or four months later.

T: In that time people started speedrunning it, and it got a little press. It seemed like there was more there, and we started getting ideas for how to expand the mechanics. Originally, the new Celeste was also going to be fairly small. We were going to take that original idea and instead of spending four days on it, we'd spend three months on it. I think it was almost in line with Pico-8 as a free game, but as we explored it, it kept growing and ended up taking us over two years.

What drew you to develop on the Pico-8 originally?
B: The Pico-8 is interesting. It's a fantasy console. It's pretending to be a console that never existed. I just like tinkering and stuff. I grew up making games in Game Maker and RPG Maker, so the Pico-8 felt like a good opportunity. It's very limited and restrictive because it's trying to emulate consoles from the late '80s, so you can only have 16 colors, your screen is very tiny, and you only have so much memory in terms of how much code there can be or how much art there can be. But making stuff in a really limited space can be very expressive because you have to make cuts, and you have to make tough decisions that can push a project forward. It's fun to make something in a restrictive space like that.

Every level in Celeste features a new mechanic or something different to explore, but what mechanics did you experiment with that didn't make the cut?
T: Water levels got completely cut. Chapter six was originally a water world. I ended up cutting water because it completely removed the dash economy where you have to preserve your dash, which was one of the most interesting parts of the game.

B: For a while, there were 20 screens of water levels where you had to move through water, avoid enemies.

T: It was really bad. [laughs] After the water didn't work, we tried – you know the feather that makes you fly? With the feather, we originally gave you infinite dashes for 10 or so seconds, but that ended up having the same problem as water.

The controls are great. How long did it take you guys to nail those down?
B: We had the core stuff early on like dashing and climbing walls, but a lot of stuff all around that or how they felt…

T: I like tweaking numbers. I remember one number that changed a week before release. If you're climbing or clinging to a wall, you hold down and slide down the wall. I realized that number was too fast, and so I changed it to make it slower. I was like, "Okay, good. Glad we caught that before release." [laughs]

B: And there are other things we tried around that mechanic. You know the stamina you have when you're climbing a wall? For a while, you had to land on the ground and catch your breath and she'd sit there for a second or two. But it broke the flow of the game.

Do you guys find that part of game development stressful? Because you have good ideas and then you put it in and it doesn't work for some reason.
T: That always happens. Pretty much nothing works on the first try.

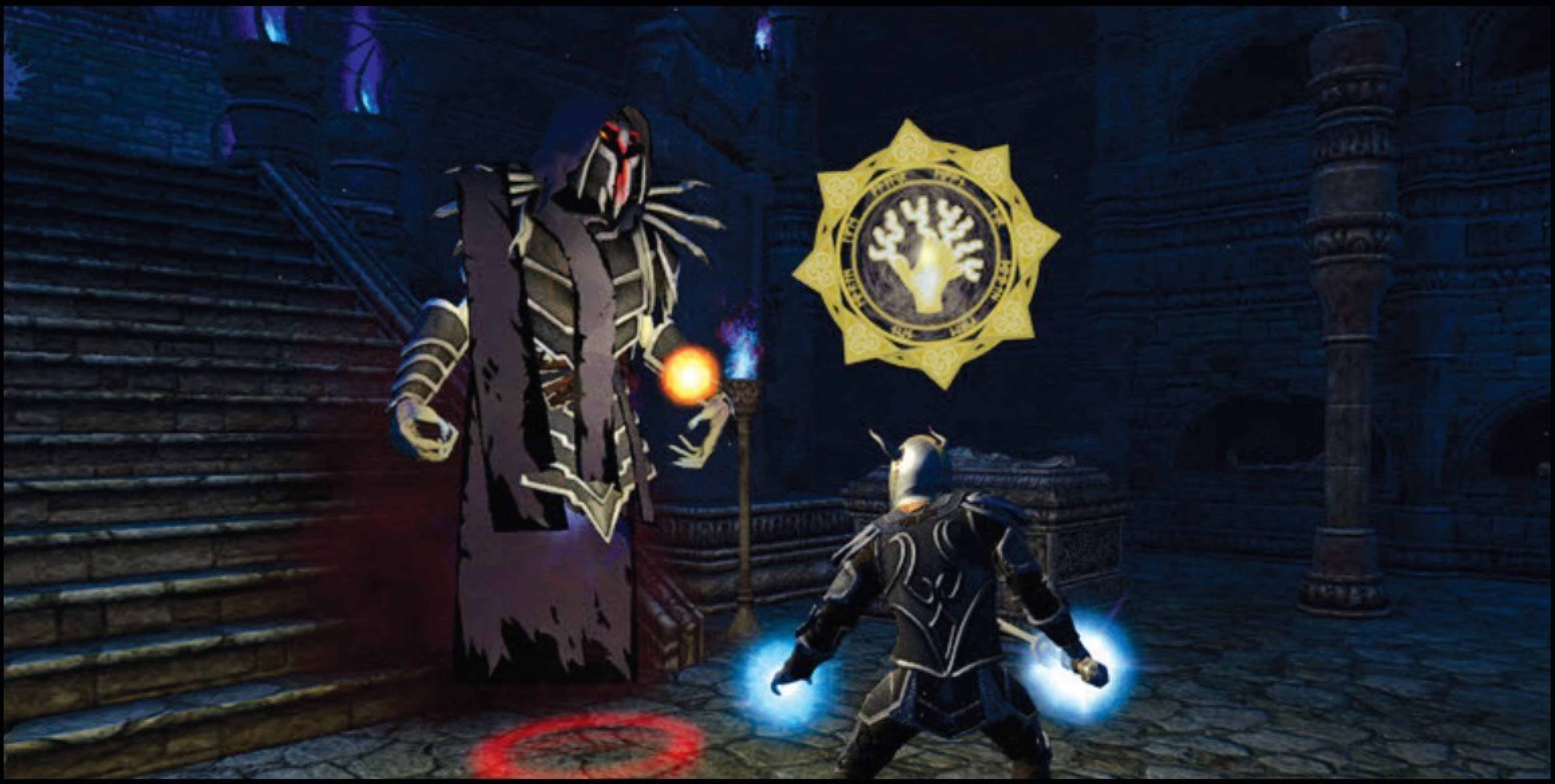
B: You get a little used to the idea of "Well, this sounds really cool and I'm going to try it." Then you try it and it's like, "This isn't going anywhere." Even on the first try, you already know it's going to take work. You can't put something in and run with it.

T: Often, it's hard to tell if something's going to work even if you put more work into it because we put a lot of work into stuff that ultimately gets cut. You don't know until you put more work into it. It can be demoralizing, but it's necessary because the final game you end up with is built on the backs of all those failures.

NINTENDO SWITCH
DARK SOULS
REMASTERED
SUMMER 2018
CHALLENGE DEATH.
ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.
MATURE 17+
M
ESRB
Blood and Gore
Partial Nudity
Violence
BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment
NINTENDO SWITCH
Nintendo

Game and system sold separately.

Dark Souls™: Remastered & ©BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment Inc.
©2011-2018 FromSoftware, Inc.
Nintendo Switch is a trademark of Nintendo. ©2018 Nintendo.



A Shoddy Shell Hides Promise And Potential

Ultima's legacy returns in Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues

by Daniel Tack

Ultima vets Richard Garriott and Starr Long teamed up for this Kickstarter-fueled MMORPG that promises a return to many of the aspects that players love from the franchise (especially Ultima Online) – a vast open world of choices and exploration, player-driven economy and housing, and skill-based leveling with no class confines. Shroud of the Avatar delivers a profoundly different MMO experience than the theme park quest chains and dungeon queues that have become ubiquitous in modern times. However, the framework behind everything is baffling and threadbare at times, making the overall experience mixed at best. But that doesn't mean fans of games of yesteryear, especially solo players, can't find something enchanting here.

As an avatar, the player is thrust into the fantasy world of New Britannia with little to go on, and must unravel the mysteries behind an ancient evil and a growing threat. After making a few decisions about how you would approach different situations, like disobeying orders to save a friend during a critical battle, you are given a base set of skills to work with. Regardless of what path you're placed in, you're free to develop your character and abilities however you wish.

Players can opt to play solo and offline – though that character won't transfer to online play. Online, players can choose to have the full MMORPG experience or simply play single-player online, allowing them to interact with player vendors, towns, and housing. If you crave solo play in a world with other players, this might be the right choice, as you can interact with many things that other players set up – but you probably won't find the party-based dungeon delves that you are used to in other games.

Shroud of the Avatar is set up with a profound single-player slant. If you enjoy hours of roaming the world, collecting cloth, skinning wolves, and cobbling together some new pieces of gear while you work up your skills for a bonus health or point of damage at a time, this can be an enjoyable experience. Taking your haul home and selling everything for some cash to purchase new goods from player vendors is a satisfying loop. I had a great time slowly leveling up my skills as I bashed bandits, wolves, and spiders into the dust. Skill-based progression systems are rare today, and I adore them.

However, some aspects of this loop feel bizarre and disjointed at times, especially in the modern MMORPG landscape. Quests offer the player keywords to shoot back to quest givers by clicking on dialogue options or even by entering their own text. This throwback feature seems like it would be cool but it feels out of place and gimmicky, especially since even many of the major quests amount to fetch or collect quests.

An overworld map lets players move from zone to zone and choose adventuring areas that suit their fancy, but these zones – and many of the towns – feel barren and empty. Towns are often enormous and seeing the player-made housing and creations is great, but finding your way to even a simple trainer or vendor can feel like a week-long expedition through endless lamp posts and rolling hills.

Combat is plagued by poor, clunky animations and a floaty feel, despite the systems behind it being fun and interesting. Delving into moon or chaos magic and picking up a maul is great thematic fun, and you can mix and match things freely. If you want to be a heavy armor magic user that uses a bow, you can – though you'll have to compensate for the magic-fizzle chance of the extra protection. As is the case with so many aspects of this game, the underlying systems are intriguing, but the execution falls flat.

Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues has promise to carve out a niche in the MMORPG space today. However, much of that potential is unrealized in its current form, as it is more than a little rough around the edges.

NINTENDO SWITCH

PLAY ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

NINTENDO SWITCH

HYRULE WARRIORS
DEFINITIVE EDITION
Wolfenstein II
THE NEW COLOSSUS
DARK SOULS
REMASTERED

Games Shown:

TEEN to MATURE 17+
T-M
ESRB esrb.org

Games and system sold separately.

Game trademarks and copyrights are properties of their respective owners. Nintendo properties are trademarks of Nintendo. ©2018 Nintendo.

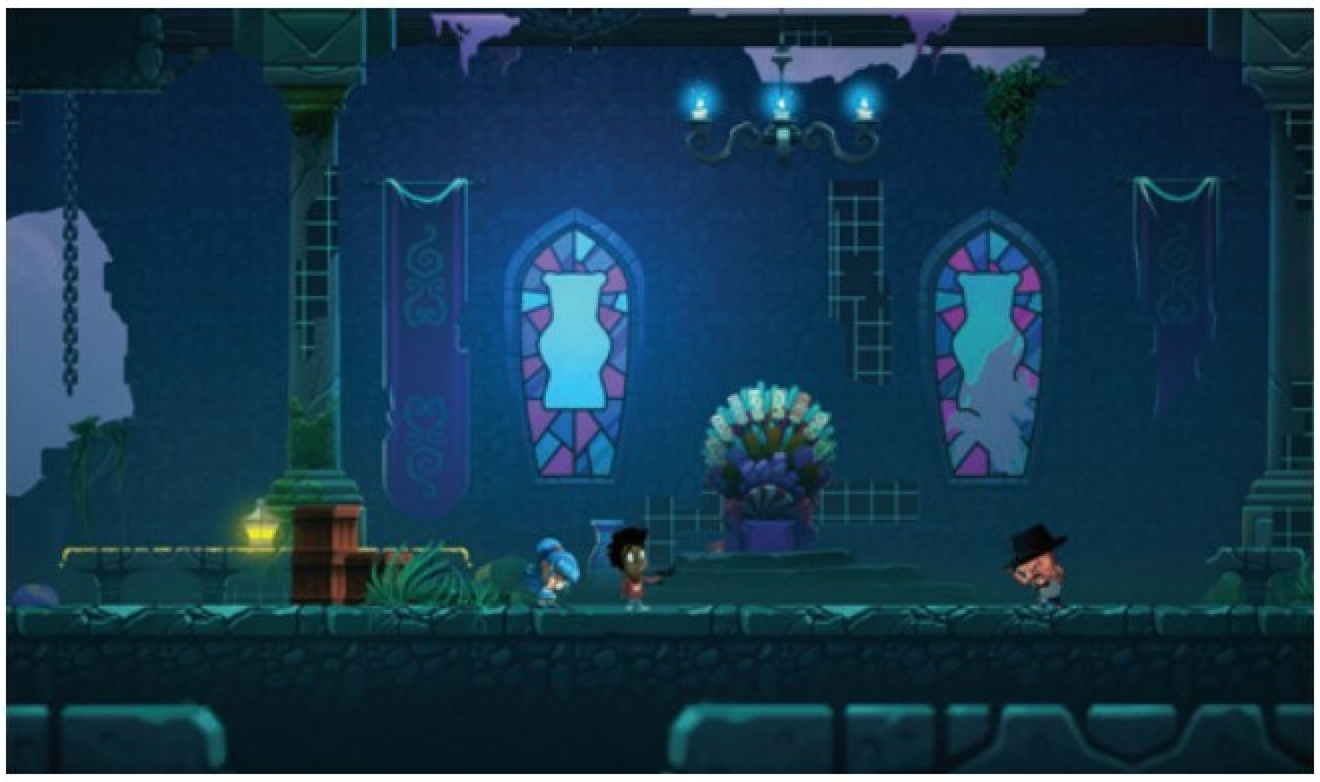
Nintendo

NINTENDO SWITCH

Captivating Indies On The Horizon

The spring game conventions and developer gatherings are a perfect time to get a picture of the upcoming indie-game scene. This year's shows were no exception, as we've had the opportunity to see and play a ton of awesome projects. Check out some of our favorites.

by Game Informer Staff



Apocalypse Cow

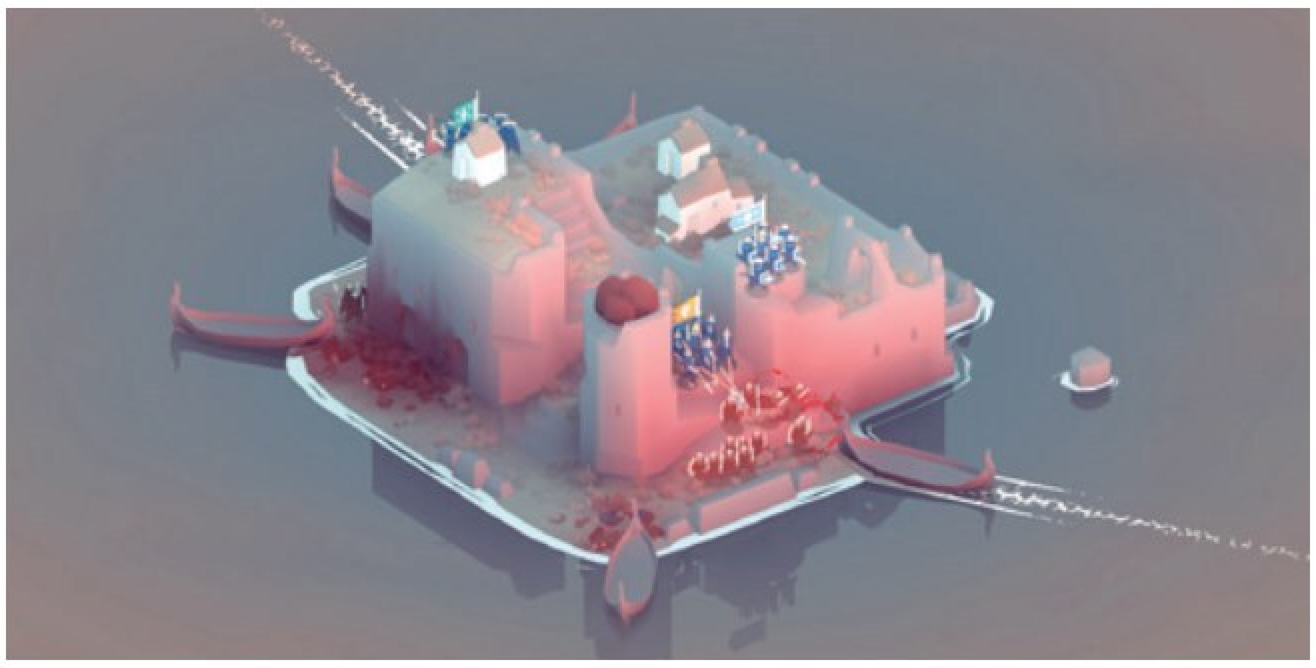
Platform: Xbox One • PC

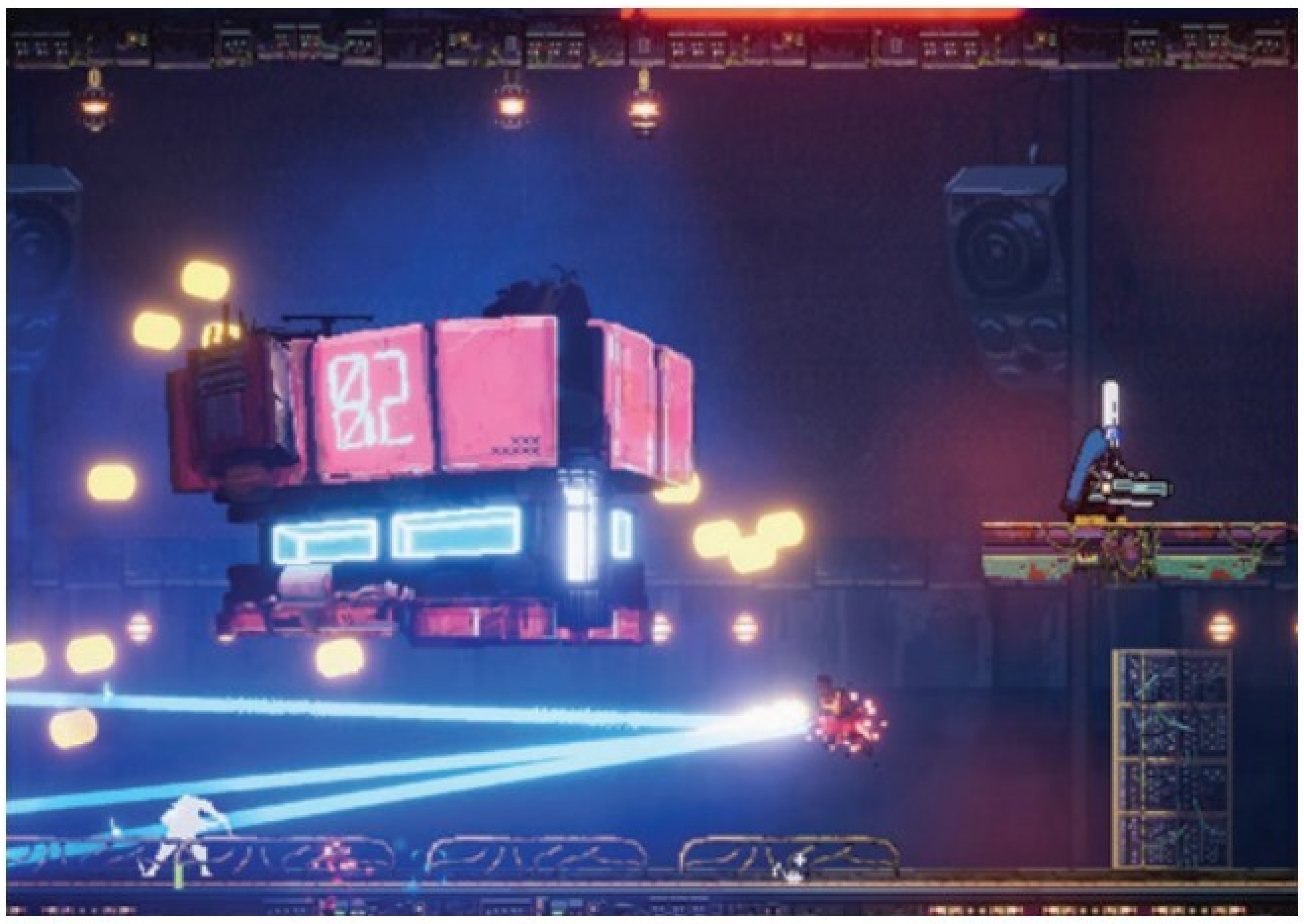
Going on a 2D rampage is usually a good time, but Apocalypse Cow adds new twists to the style you know well from games like Metal Slug, Contra, and Broforce. As Penny, you push your way through colorful side-scrolling stages, taking down legions of enemies in set-up encounters. The odds are stacked against you, which is further accentuated by a death counter that appears each time you fail, taunting you with how many times you've died. And you will fail a lot. Many of the sequences feature puzzle or bullet-hell elements, but thankfully you have the ability to dramatically slow time. Speeding around slashing enemies in two with your sword while time is mostly frozen is immensely satisfying, and the mechanic is even more rewarding once you finish a level and you get to see how you looked in real-time. It's not all gore and difficulty, however, as players can spot pop-culture references throughout, from Super Mario Bros. to The Lord of the Rings. Developer Monsters plans to launch Apocalypse Cow later this year.

Bad North

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • Mac • iOS • Android

Raw Fury's Bad North has a gorgeous watercolor aesthetic, where even bloodstains seem like they came from a paintbrush. This minimalist tower-defense game has you protecting a procedurally generated island from waves of Vikings who arrive by boat. With infantrymen, archers, and pike soldiers, you use your troops strategically to protect the island's homes from being burnt down. If all the houses are destroyed, it's game over and you must restart the level. You can rotate the island with ease to order your units from different perspectives, giving you an edge over your opponents. Islands differ dramatically from one to the next, with some having caves to shield you from attacks and others having sunken ruins that act as maze-like barriers. For each house you save, you receive coins that are used to upgrade your units, such as the veteran status that gives them more accuracy. When you find yourself in a tight spot and your squad starts to drop like flies, you can send them into a house to be replenished. The unit returns to full size, but without them on the field temporarily, it may put you at a disadvantage. Look for Bad North this summer.





Black Future '88

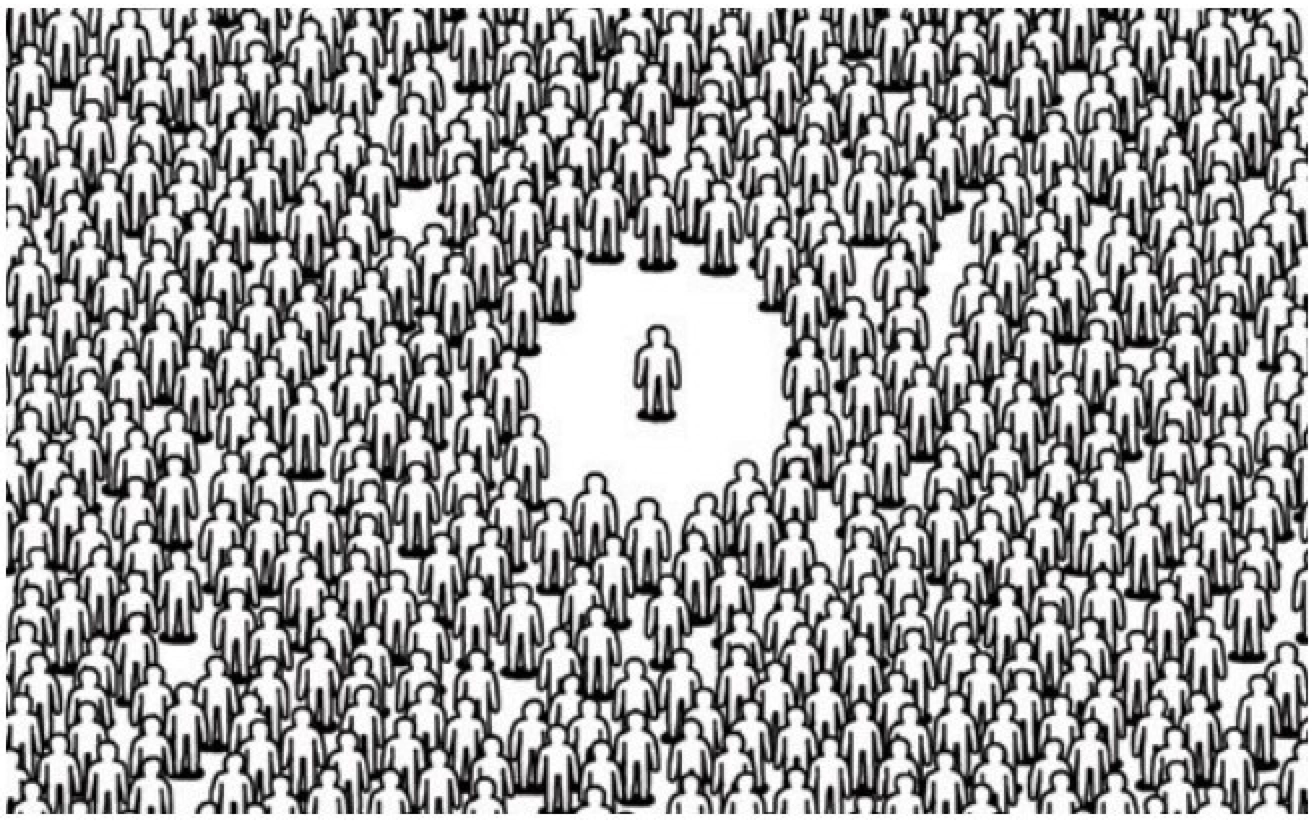
Platform: PC

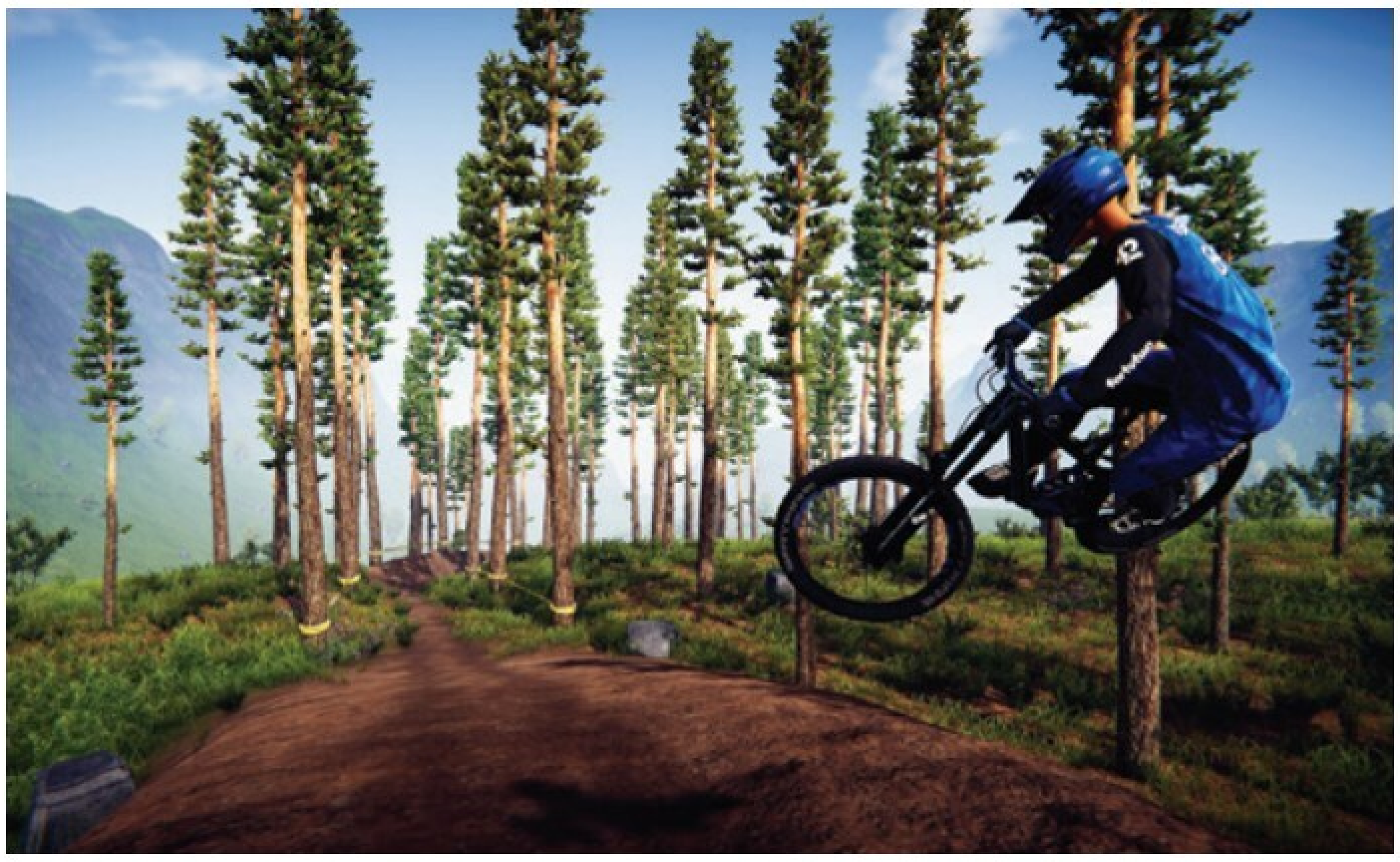
This 2D action/platformer from developer Super Scary Snakes tasks players with defeating enemies while exploring techno-infused *Blade Runner*-style environments. The ultimate goal is to find and defeat the boss of each area, but just rushing toward them will lead to certain death. Instead, players use all the shooting and mobility tools at their disposal to destroy all the enemies in a room and collect new and stronger guns. Black Future's movement feels extremely responsive and fantastic; shooting an enemy off a dashing jump-shot and sliding through the exit door in one quick motion is a nearly incomparable sensation. The action feels similar to games like Mega Man Zero, with fast-moving dodges and frenetic boss fights. Black Future '88 is expected to launch later this year.

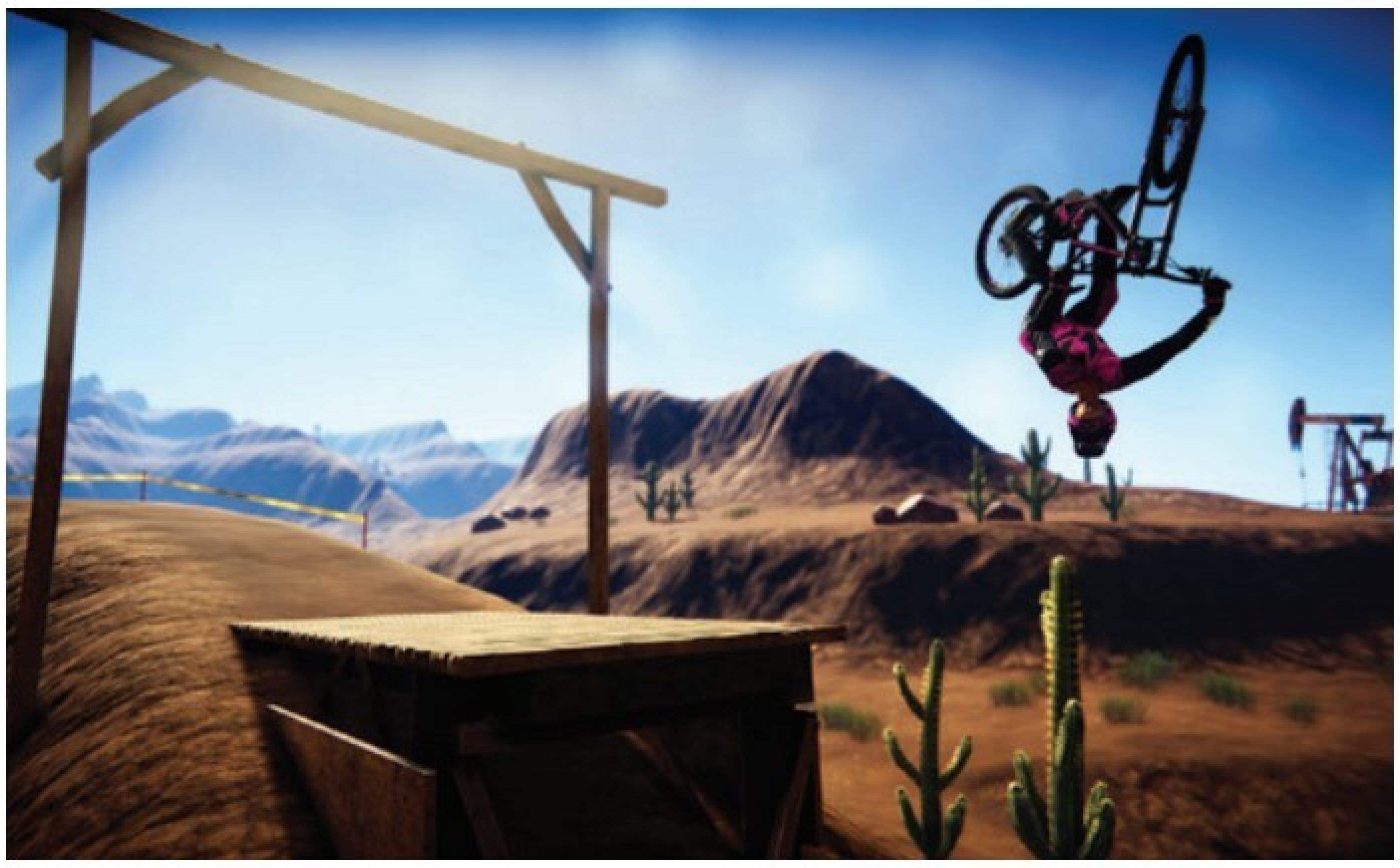
Kids

Platform: PC • Mac • iOS • Android

Following Plug & Play, Kids is the second collaboration between director and animator Michael Frei and game designer Mario von Rickenbach. This experimental game about crowds requires you to click and tap hordes of faceless, black-and-white humans to progress. It comes across like an interactive animation, where minimal effort is needed on your part. The tiny characters each build strange scenes, such as one person stating "No one likes me," and then having to navigate him through a large crowd where every other being avoids him like the plague. In another scene, dozens point to one human who says, "I won't do it." Only once you find a willing volunteer can you progress. Kids is bizarre, entertaining, funny, and at times unsettling – it left us pondering its theme of individualism days after the presentation. Kids releases later this year in three formats: as a game, an art exhibition, and a short film.



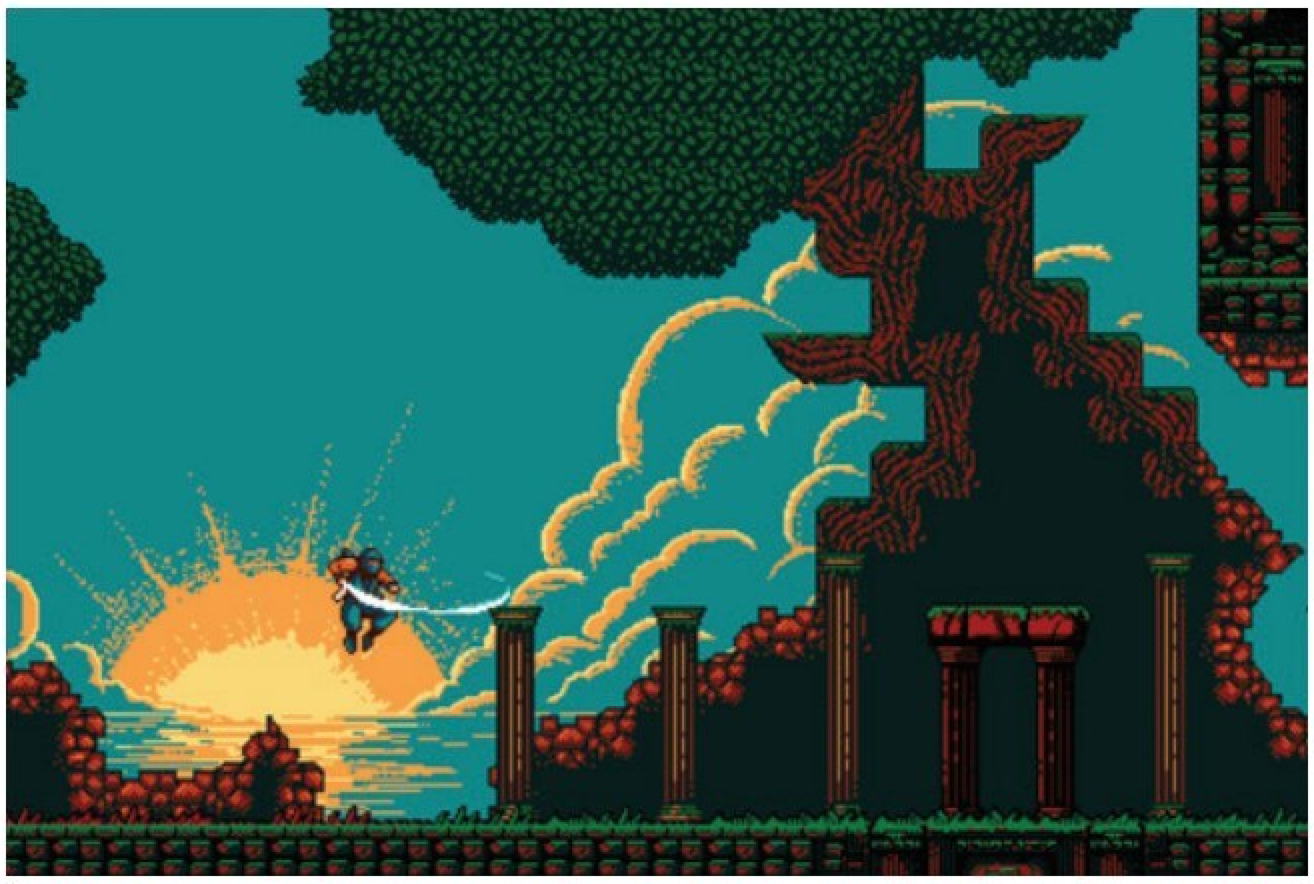




Descenders

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

Trials fans should keep an eye on Descenders from developer RageSquid. Descenders swings the camera behind the rider, giving you more variables to consider during your run. Instead of following a straight path, you need to worry about not going too fast into a curve or avoiding logs and rocks in the path. The pretty graphics and simple controls make it approachable for anyone, but once you hit more difficult courses, you get a full demonstration of the ragdoll physics. Hitting a ramp, pulling a backflip, and landing clean feels great, but you better complete your rotation or you'll come crashing down. The campaign provides a robust experience, but freeride is fun to experiment with, as you procedurally generate courses based on your settings. Want a steep, straight ride with tons of ramps? Or do you want to navigate a twisting path through the foggy woods at night? You can tell the freeride generator what you want, and it will build the course you crave. Descenders is available now on Steam Early Access, and is coming to Xbox Game Preview this summer. The full release is scheduled for later this year.



The Messenger

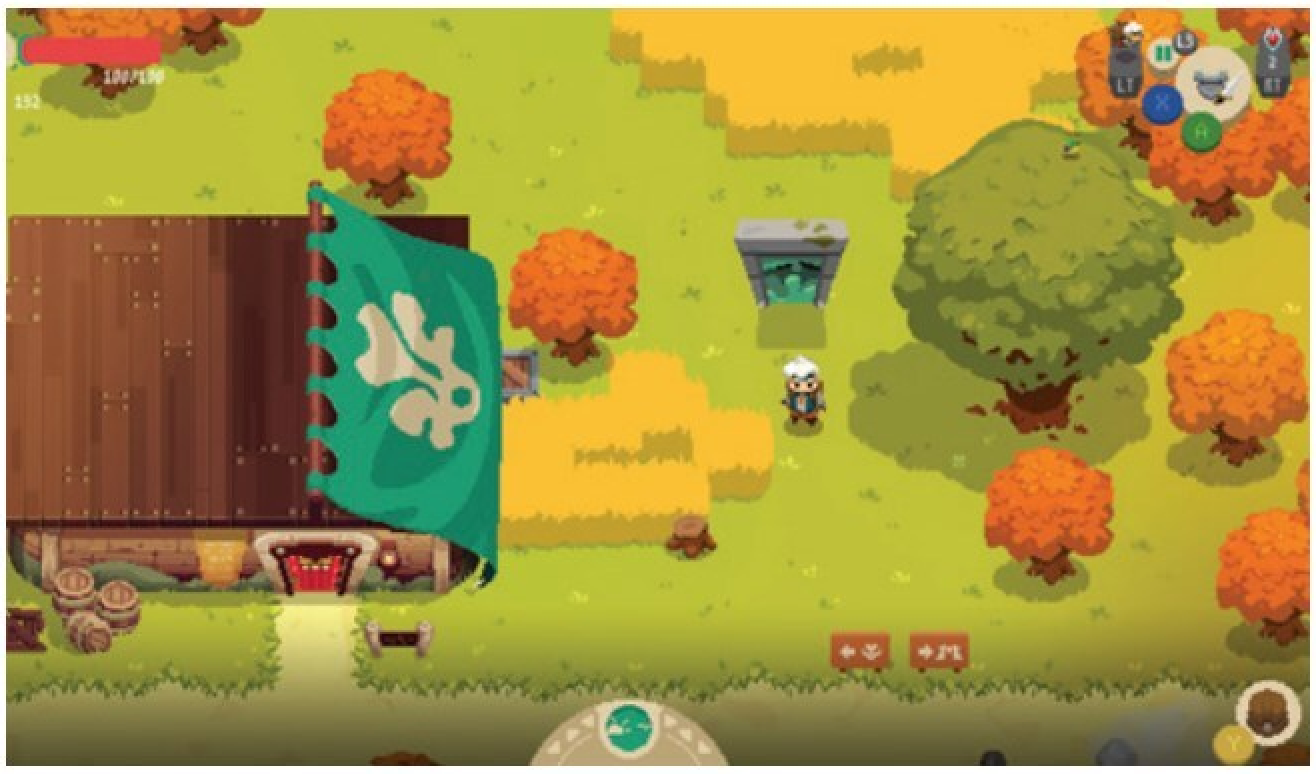
Platform: Switch • PC

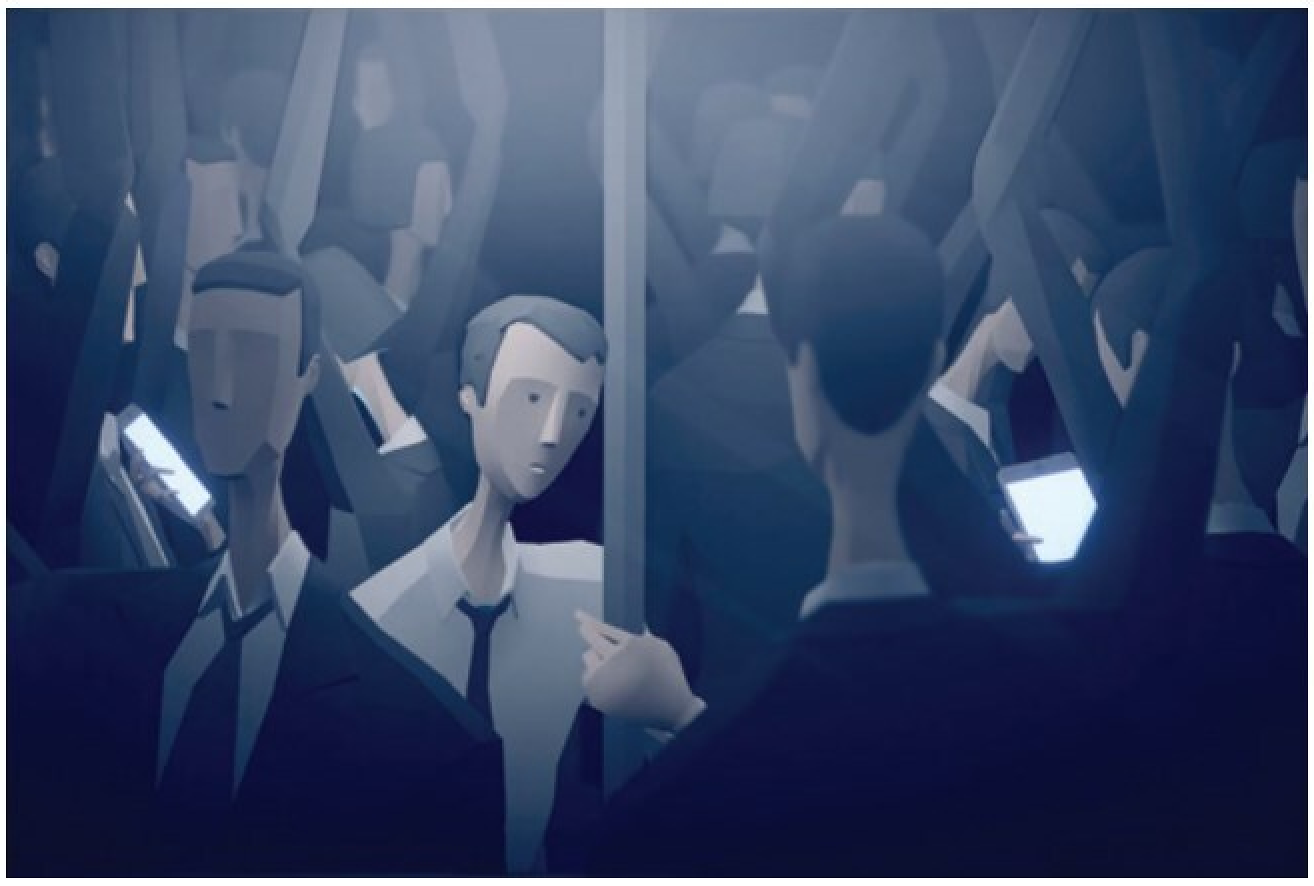
The Messenger doesn't try to hide its Ninja Gaiden inspiration. The smooth-controlling, challenging action side-scroller plays and looks just like an 8-bit love letter to Tecmo's classic series. However, it goes much deeper than that. At one point in the game, you flash 500 years into the future. To reflect this passage of time, the graphics and sound bumps from 8-bit to 16-bit, completely changing the aesthetic of the game. The game runs both versions simultaneously, so puzzles that require bouncing back and forth between graphical styles present themselves. Much like the beloved "Effect and Cause" stage from Titanfall 2, some paths and enemies are only accessible in one graphical style, so you must be clever with how you swap between the two. While it certainly pays homage to Ninja Gaiden, developer Sabotage hopes to carve its own legacy when The Messenger launches later this summer.

Moonlighter

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • Mac

Moonlighter casts players as a shopkeeper by day and a hero by night. Protagonist Will runs a modest business in a small village, but he dreams of achieving greater things. Lucky for him, dungeons ripe for exploring are right near his village. You manage both the store and his journeys into dangerous areas ravaged by monsters. As you venture further into the dungeons, you collect raw goods that can later be sold in your shop. Setting an appropriate price to these items can make them more appealing to customers. These patrons have varying reactions to what you offer, and if you please them, it helps you progress towards upgrading your shop. The town as a whole can also be upgraded through the town board where you recruit new merchants. For example, if the retailer moves to town, he can restore items you lost while dungeon crawling. Moonlighter is charming in both its pixel aesthetic and unique blend of dungeon-crawling and shop-managing. We're excited to see how this hybrid of genres turns out when it launches on May 29.





Mosaic

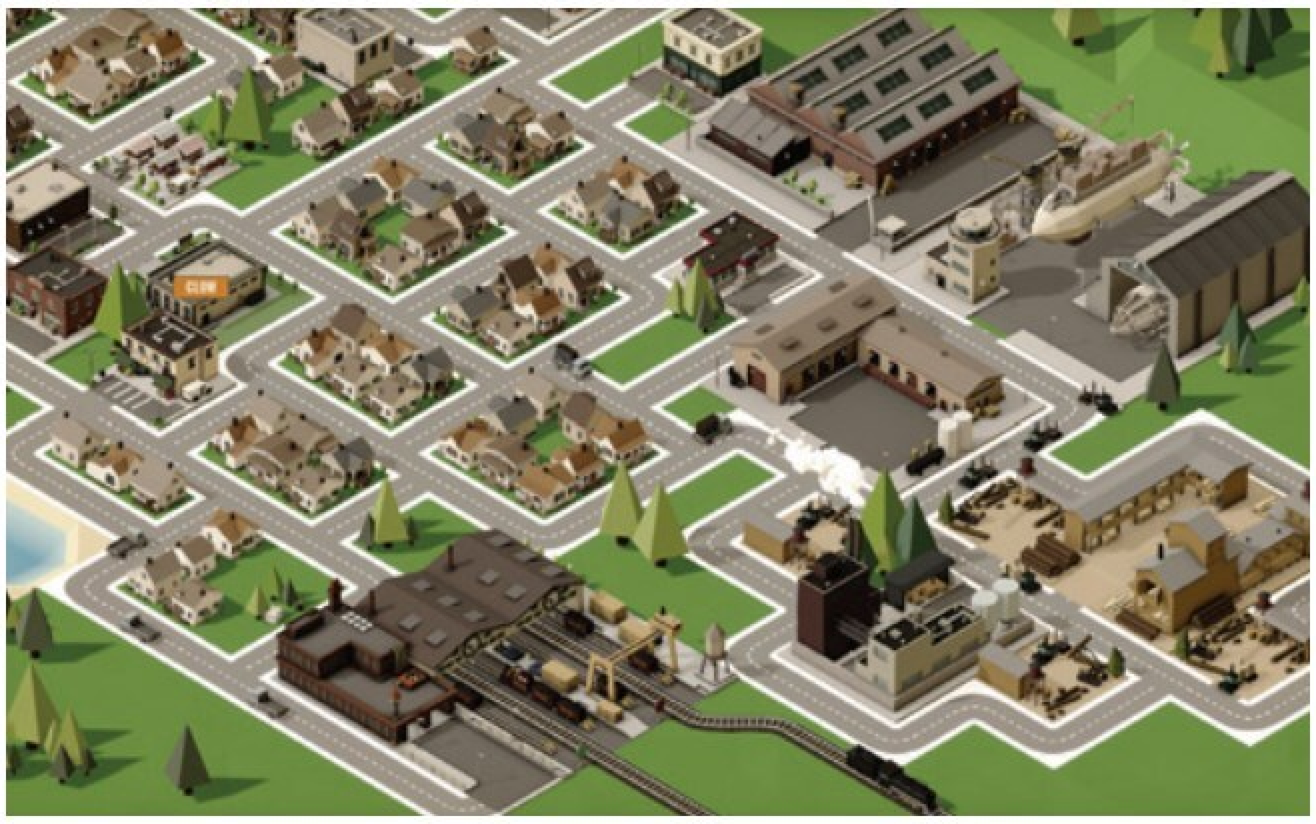
Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Mac

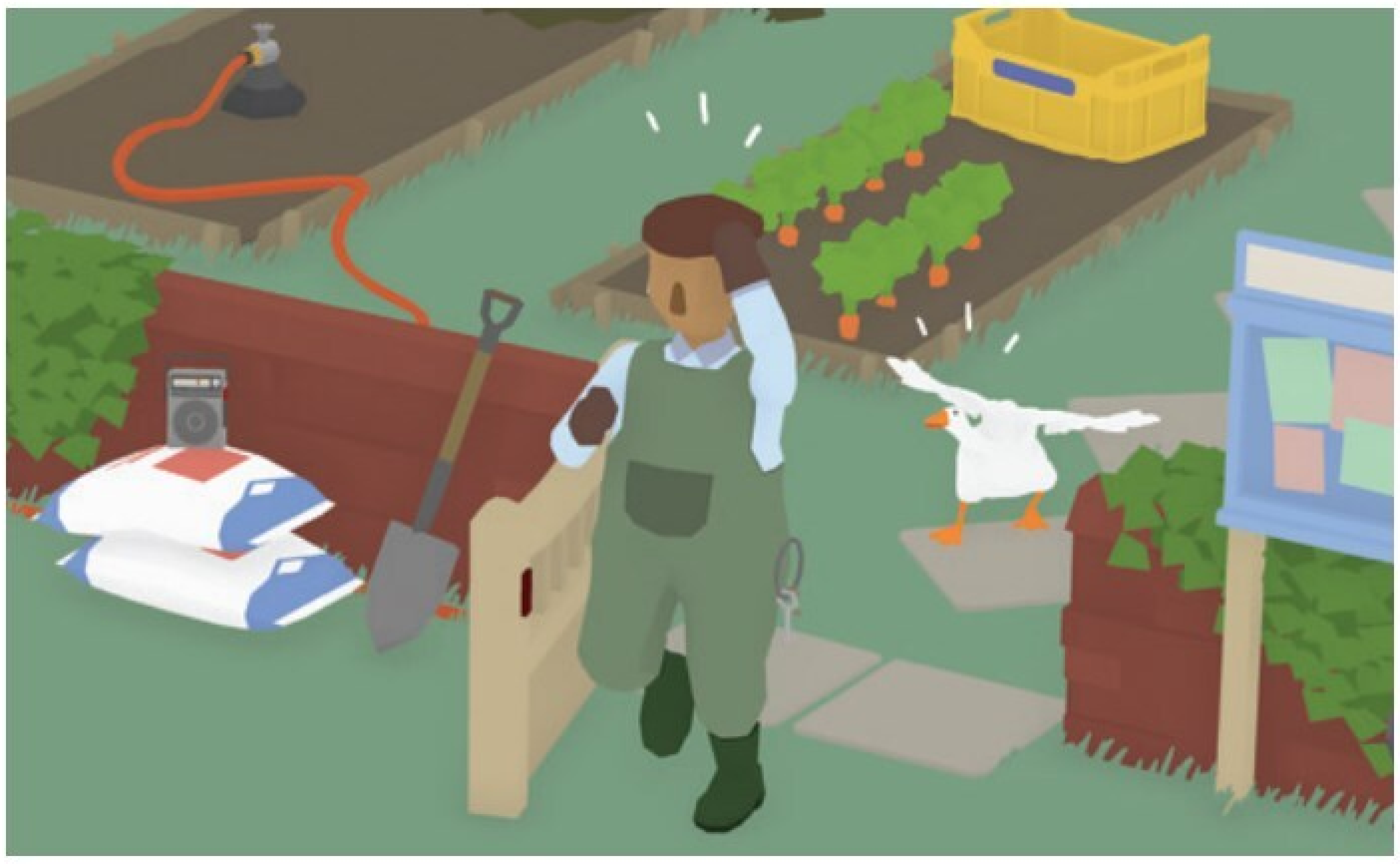
Mosaic has an unsettling vibe similar to developer Krillbite's previous title, Among The Sleep, but this narrative-driven experience nonetheless offers something altogether unique. Playing as a tall, lanky businessman in a corporate dystopia, Mosaic tasks you with leading him through his dreary commute to work. With a dimly lit aesthetic and limited color palette, Mosaic has a bleak and hopeless feel that is somehow enchanting. This is partly accomplished through the eerie mysteries you encounter on your walk to work, such as a red glow coming from a gate left ajar near a construction site. Other times, it's almost otherworldly as you take control of a butterfly in a dream-like sequence. The art direction of these environments is brilliant, bringing this somber and oppressive world to life. Releasing later this year, we're curious to uncover Mosaic's tantalizing mysteries.

Rise Of Industry

Platform: PC • Linux

Rise of Industry takes inspiration from major simulation franchises like SimCity and Tropico to deliver an industry-focused experience that has you questioning your every business decision. Unlike other sims, Rise of Industry gives you one goal: develop your region to be a highly profitable industrial area. Doing so means performing a delicate balancing act as you aggressively expand your empire in the region without upsetting the citizens to the point they boycott your products. Currently, you can play with limited funds in campaign mode, unlimited funds in free play, or tweak every aspect of the land mass in custom games. Before launch, developer Dapper Penguin Studios plans on adding scenarios to complete in order to give you additional challenges. Following launch, Rise of Industry will introduce both cooperative and competitive multiplayer modes as a free update. Rise of Industry is scheduled to hit full release near the end of this year.





Untitled Goose Game

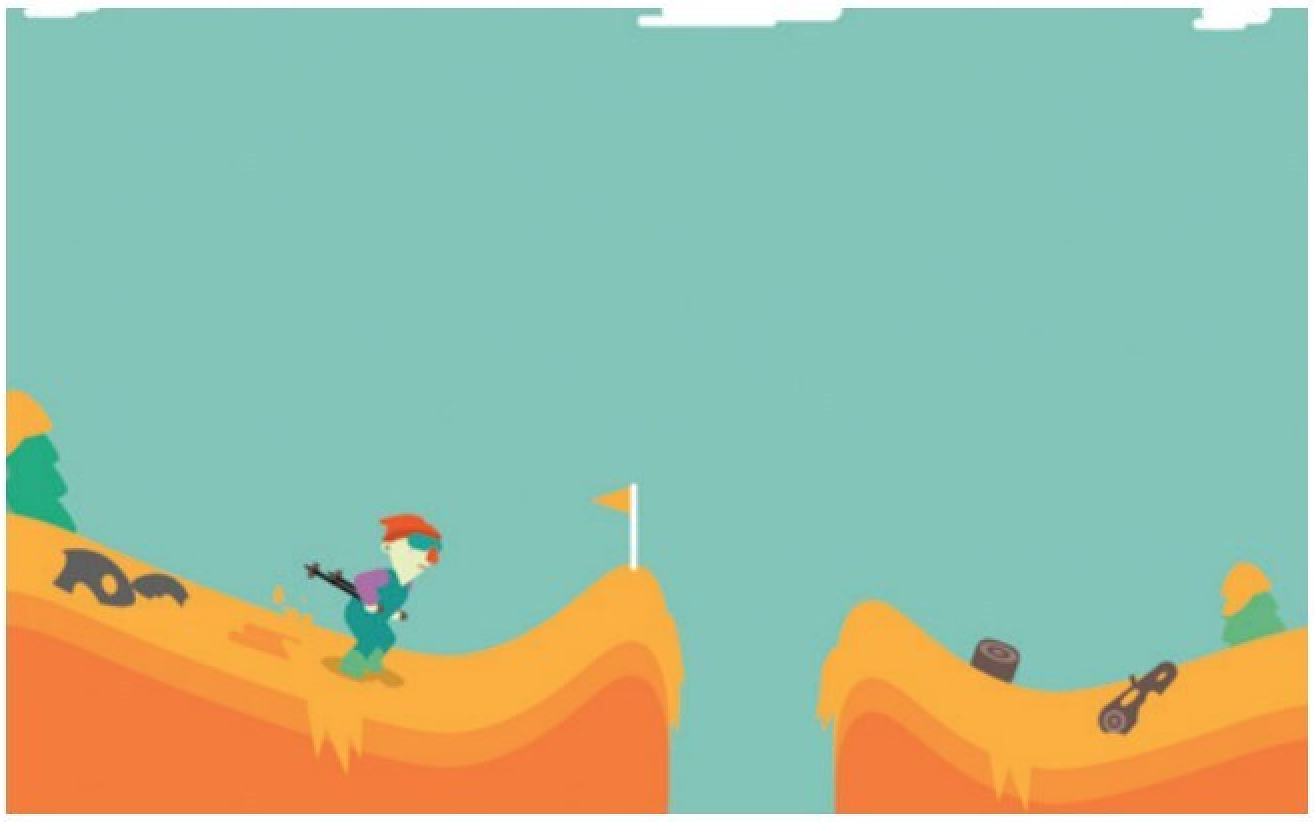
Platform: PC

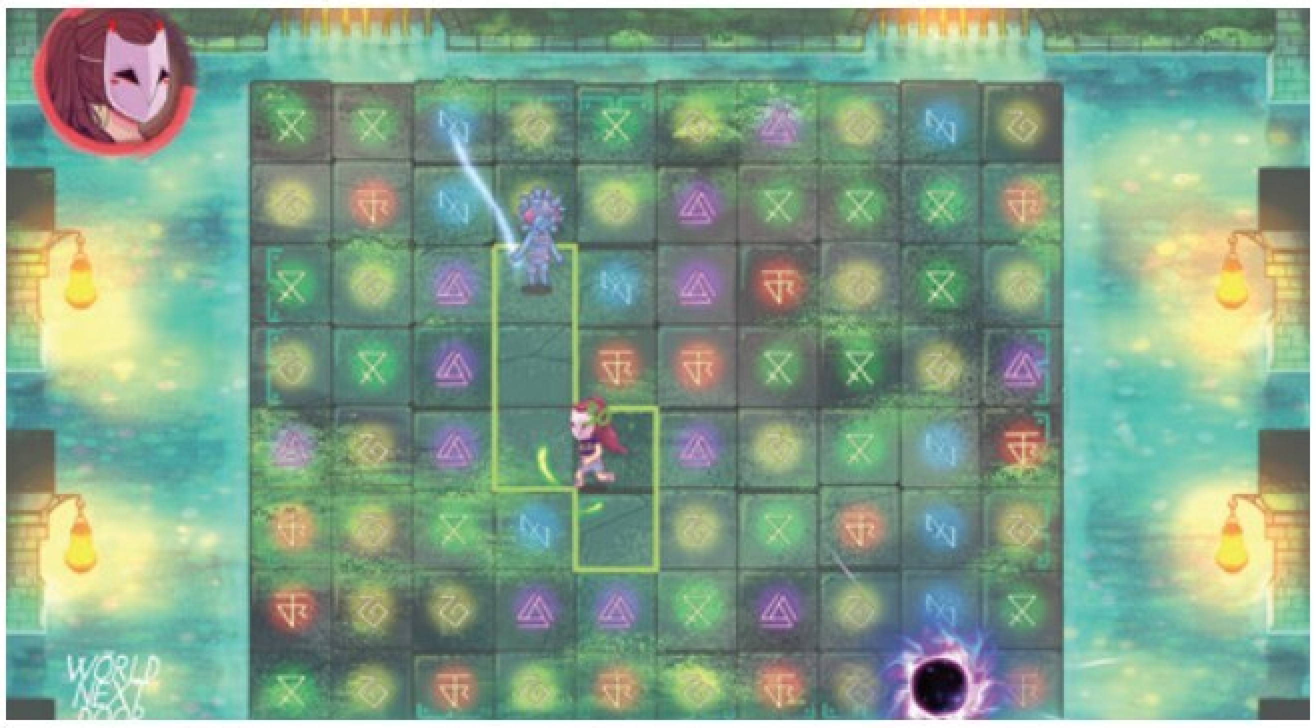
The makers of Push Me Pull You continue their quest to make quirky games with this hilarious title that puts players in control of a mischievous goose wreaking havoc on an unassuming town. A griefer's delight, the game combines stealth with the endless source of joy that is terrorizing and frustrating complete strangers. The demo we watched pitted the public nuisance against a poor groundskeeper just trying to get his work done. The goose dragged his picnic basket and sandwich into the pond, ran around with his radio in his beak during a Benny Hill-esque chase sequence, turned on a nearby sprinkler to soak the man, and even stole the keys off his belt. These hijinks aren't just freeform possibilities, they are the actual objectives. It looks as strange as it sounds, but there's something darkly comic and alluring about taking control of this dastardly goose. Developer House House is expected to launch the game later this year.

What The Golf?

Platform: PC • Mac

Golfing straight up the fairway is ideal, but let's be honest: It's also boring. Developer Triband has other ideas for spicing up the sport with this inventive take that challenges preconceptions and has fun breaking the concept with unexpected twists. Maybe instead of firing the golf ball in the intended direction after you line up the shot, the golfer gets catapulted toward the pin instead. What if the golf ball is replaced by a house or soccer ball that you have to navigate through hazards? And in perhaps the best twist of all, what would golf be like if it followed the design rules of Superhot? Throughout the frenzied demo, What The Golf? continued to throw clever twists our way, and we're excited to see what other hijinks they come up with. What the Golf? is currently running a crowdfunding campaign on Fig, where you can download a demo of the game. Triband says the game should come out sometime this year.





The World Next Door

Platform: PC

Noted anime and manga distributor Viz Media's first foray into the gaming space is with developer Rose City Games on The World Next Door. Jun gets trapped in a parallel dimension where humans die after just a few days. Much of the story is told through humorous choice-driven narrative sequences with your party of magical characters brimming with personality. If you develop a good relationship with a character, they can help you during encounters. The battle system is a mix of top-down action and a match-three puzzle. Once tiles are matched, you can activate them to unleash the power of that color; yellow tiles send a stunning shock, green sets up a healing effect, purple casts a void area-of-effect spell, and red blasts fireballs. The more tiles are matched upon activation, the stronger the spell. In addition, since the characters are running around on the board, you must be strategic with when you activate these spells; the attacks are easily dodged by a skilled player (or A.I.). The World Next Door doesn't currently have a release window.

The Possibilities And Perils Of Blockchain

The tech industry's latest obsession sets its sights on the gaming industry

by Jeff Marchiafava

If you've even so much as glimpsed at a website or social media feed in the past few months, chances are you've run across the term "blockchain" one or two (or a hundred) times. Proponents of the new method for creating decentralized databases are heralding blockchains as the next evolution of the banking, healthcare, and accounting industries, along with virtually any other aspect of civilization that involves a computer. Skeptics, on the other hand, are denouncing blockchains as a flawed technology being preyed on by get-rich-quick schemers and scam artists.

So what is a blockchain, and more importantly, what does it mean for gaming? We take a look at how the underlying technology works and what makes it so exciting – and controversial.

What Is Blockchain?

At its core, blockchain technology all comes down to trust, or more precisely, the complete lack thereof. Currently, any kind of digital transaction between two users requires an independent third party to act as a go-between, whether it's PayPal processing an online purchase or Blizzard managing your auction in World of Warcraft. However, the trust we place in our virtual mediators has a cost – not only in the form of service fees, but also in the personal data we relinquish as part of the transaction. That information gets stored in the private databases of the overseeing companies, which become ripe targets for hackers and criminals as the data breaches of everyone from Sony to Equifax to Facebook have proven time and time again.

Blockchain networks shift control back to the users by logging all of the transactions (i.e. blocks) onto an ever-expanding public ledger (i.e. chain) that anyone can see. Unlike a centralized database, a copy of this ledger exists on every computer within the network, with each new transaction being added, verified, and disseminated by each node. As such, faking a transaction would mean fooling the entire network – and because users are represented solely by anonymous online addresses, their transactions can be faithfully tracked without the risk of exposing their personal information.

But the true benefit of blockchains isn't just cutting out middle-men or increased anonymity. The due diligence of the blockchain network means that for the first time, you can have true, autonomous, and verifiable ownership over a digital good, without the danger of others stealing or duplicating that good.

So far the biggest use of blockchains have been cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum, which have spawned a new billion-dollar industry virtually overnight (along with a number of problems we'll get to later). However, the digital ownership that blockchains afford holds some exciting potential for gaming as well.

Bitcoin is the world's leading cryptocurrency, and currently has a market cap of $149.6 billion

A World Of Possibilities

Before tantalizing you with a list of revolutionary new gaming uses for blockchains, we need to stress that these features are still hypothetical; tons of game companies are now jumping into the blockchain space, but their efforts – while much hyped – are still unproven. That said, here are some of the avenues developers are exploring.

Collectibles With Value

It's no secret that gamers like collecting things, from Destiny's ultra-powerful guns to exclusive skins in Overwatch. Storing these collectibles as discrete data blocks in a blockchain would make each item you attained wholly unique, with your ownership verified on the open ledger. This could also be used to eliminate item duping and to confirm the rarity of items, as players would be able to see every item in the game's ecosystem on the ever-expanding blockchain.

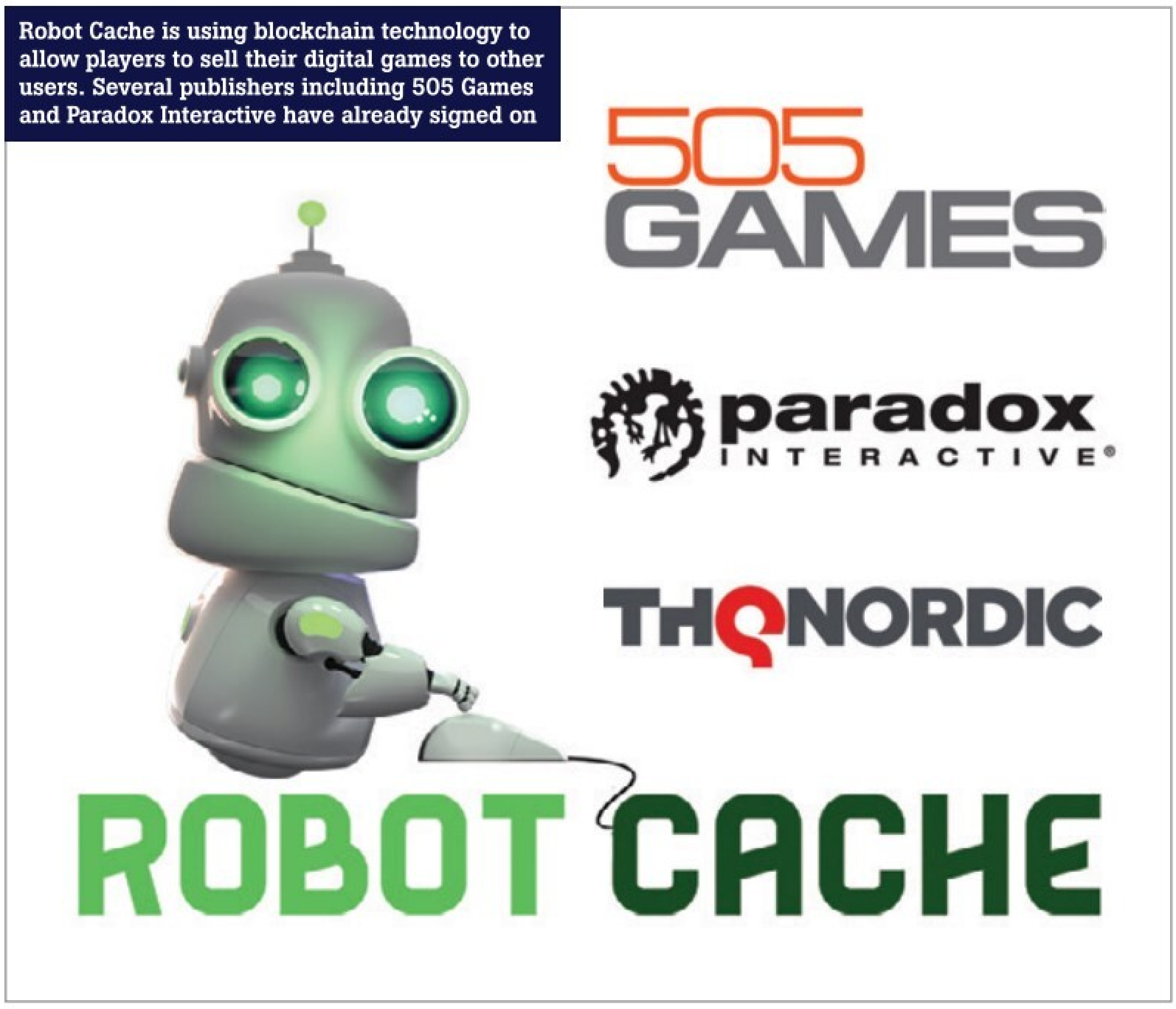
An Open Market For All

Another perk of storing in-game items in a blockchain would be the inherent ability to then buy, sell, trade, and gift those items with other players. The open ledger would be able to instantly verify the item in question and disseminate the exchange across the entire blockchain network, once again making it impossible to sell duplicates to multiple buyers. Sales and trades could even take place outside of the game entirely, allowing you to manage your inventory via the virtual wallets that cryptocurrencies already use.

Virtual Item, Real Money

Unlike the premium currencies used in many video games today, the value of digital goods stored on a cryptocurrency blockchain wouldn't be limited to the game's economy. Once the item is sold, the cryptocurrency you earn could then be exchanged for real-world currency via virtual trade exchanges. While not the most in-depth game, Cryptokitties already serves as a successful proof-of-concept for this potential, allowing players to buy, sell, and breed unique cat avatars for Ethereum coins.

Robot Cache is using blockchain technology to allow players to sell their digital games to other users. Several publishers including 505 Games and Paradox Interactive have already signed on



In-Game Worlds Collide

All of the possibilities described so far could even be used by multiple different games on the same blockchain, allowing for a degree of interactivity. That doesn't mean you'd be able to import your favorite Destiny 3 scout rifle into Diablo IV, for instance, but if both games stored their items as data blocks on the same network, you could theoretically trade your virtual firearm for a Diablo player's killer barbarian sword – or even the whole barbarian.

Game Sales Revisited

The ability for blockchain networks to chronicle digital ownership could even extend to the games themselves. One of the most revolutionary proposals for blockchain integration comes from veteran game designer Brian Fargo, who announced he's working on a new PC storefront named Robot Cache. The Steam competitor will tie digital game sales to its own IRON cryptocurrency, and allow players to sell their used games directly to other players with the transactions being tracked on the blockchain. Additionally, players can opt to help process the ledger (an action known as mining), which will earn them IRON coins in the process. Like other cryptocurrencies, Robot Cache users will also be able to cash out their account for real money. So far 11 publishers and developers have signed on with Robot Cache, including 505 Games, Paradox Interactive, and THQ Nordic.

The Perils Of Blockchain

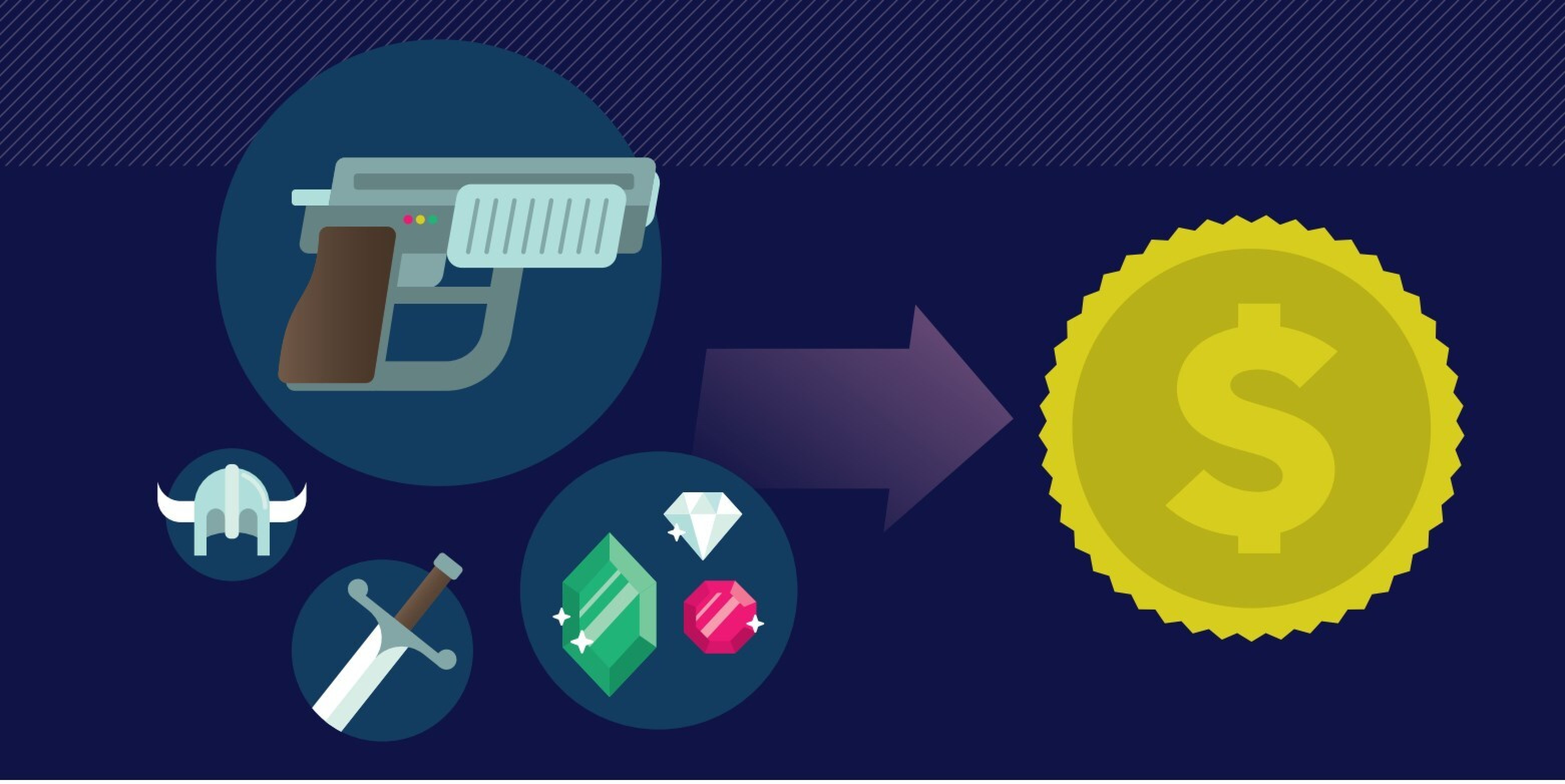
The preceding examples are just a few of the ways developers are exploring blockchain integration in gaming. However, in order to truly understand the technology's potential, we must also understand its shortcomings. Here are a few of the hurdles blockchains need to overcome in order to have a lasting and transformative impact on the industry.

Hype Alert!

There's a reason everyone is talking about how amazing blockchain technology is, and that's because it's highly profitable. The vast majority of current blockchain networks were created to introduce new cryptocurrencies to the market – more than 1,500 since Bitcoin first launched. These cryptocurrencies often launch with lucrative Initial Coin Offerings (ICOs) that rake in tens of millions of dollars from amateur investors hoping to strike it rich on the next Bitcoin. The more hype that any given cryptocurrency – or blockchain technology in general – receives, the more money their proponents stand to make. Blockchain startups are the new gold rush, and when the financial bubble surrounding them inevitably bursts, any legitimate blockchain company will have to survive the scrutiny and stigma the technology will be stuck with.

Not Quite Airtight

One of the most lauded features of blockchain technology is its supposed rock-solid security, but in the testcase of cryptocurrencies, that hasn't proven true. Cryptocurrency's short lifespan has been rife with examples of theft and fraud. In 2016, a software bug allowed a thief to pilfer $50 million from an investment fund named the Decentralized Autonomous Organization. A number of trade exchanges where cryptocurrencies are bought and sold have also been hit hard by hackers, including a $500 million heist from the Coincheck exchange last January. That dizzying sum still pales in comparison to the infamous implosion of Mt. Gox, a former card-trading site for Magic: The Gathering Online that transitioned into a Bitcoin exchange in 2010. Mt. Gox was the world's leading cryptocurrency exchange – right up until it filed for



bankruptcy protection in 2014 after more than 650,000 Bitcoins went missing. The location of those coins, which would be worth more than $4.3 billion on today's market, are still unknown, as are the perpetrators. In these cases, the anonymous nature of blockchain networks, often regarded as a benefit, work against the victims. The same is true for the much more practical threat of getting locked out of your account – because blockchain networks are autonomous, if you lose your wallet info and "seed words" (a string of random words that are assigned to you upon creation) there's no way to get your account back. Leading Bitcoin analyst company Chainalysis estimates that over three million Bitcoins have been lost forever by owners.

Value Volatility

As stated before, most blockchain networks have been built for cryptocurrencies, and many of the gaming applications currently in development are focused on this aspect as well. However, there's a big problem with the value of digital currencies: They're highly volatile. In the first month of 2018, Bitcoin's value fell a whopping 60 percent, and it's not uncommon for cryptocurrencies to rise or fall by 10 percent in a single day. Buying and selling digital goods in games becomes a lot less appealing if you can't trust the value of said goods from one day to the next. You could theoretically cash out to a real-world currency after every transaction, but that would mean continuously buying and selling on the exchanges, which opens you up to more fees and security risks. This volatility caused Valve to pull its Bitcoin payment option from Steam last December, and less-established cryptocurrencies are even more at risk.

The Efficiency Problem

While decentralized, self-validating computer databases may be powerful, they're also terribly inefficient. The need to disseminate every transaction to every computer on the network makes blockchains considerably slower than the centralized databases most consumers are currently used to. The constant processing also consumes significantly more power; financial services company Morgan Stanley estimates that Bitcoin's network alone could consume more energy than all of Argentina this year. This Achilles heel has become the primary focus of blockchain's leading developers, and must be solved for large-scale implementations to be feasible.

It's Complicated

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to widespread adoption of blockchain networks is all the smaller hurdles users must jump through to use it. Enjin Coin is an up-and-coming "cryptocurrency and virtual goods platform" geared specifically towards gaming applications. However, buying into Enjin's virtual economy is a laborious affair that includes: installing a virtual wallet application and creating an account; signing up at a trade exchange, which requires linking your bank account to the site; buying a primary cryptocurrency such as Bitcoin on the market and transferring it to your account; transferring that money to a smaller trade exchange (which requires the creation of yet another account), and using the primary cryptocurrency to buy your Enjin Coins; and finally transferring your new coins back to your wallet. Suffice it to say, this is far more complicated and confusing than plunking down a few dollars on premium currency for any of the countless games that already offer such an option.

Fighting The Status Quo

Like all potential game changers, blockchain technology must prove its worth by competing against a status quo that, as it turns out, is pretty darn good. In-game cryptocurrencies must demonstrate greater value and ease of use to consumers than real-world currencies boasting stable rates, instantaneous transactions, low-to-non-existent fees, and fraud protection. Non-monetary gaming uses for blockchains must outperform the centralized databases and server farms that fuel virtually all of modern gaming. Without that proof – and a killer app that can't be replicated in other ways – blockchain could end up in the same middling rut VR has been stuck in the past few years.

All that said, blockchain technology is still in its infancy and the software engineers who are experimenting with it are just getting started. While the current list of downsides may seem large, all nascent technologies face similar and seemingly insurmountable problems. Judging the viability of blockchains today would be like laughing at the concept of a modern-day smartphone based on the big gray bricks that mullet-sporting businessmen were rocking in the '80s (or worse, their beepers!). Sometimes all it takes is a few improvements to go from pointless to paradigm shift. Right now, there's no shortage of blockchain developers trying to make that happen. ◆

Subset For Life

In 2011, Justin Ma and Matthew Davis were just two American game designers trying to blend in at 2K Games Shanghai. But the duo bonded over their love for science fiction and board games and eventually spun off to form their own indie studio, Subset Games. The studio's first project, FTL: Faster Than Light, raised more than 20 times its initial Kickstarter goal and went on to become a massive hit on both PC and mobile. Six years after FTL, Subset released Into the Breach, a puzzle-like strategy game about Kaiju-fighting mechs and time travel. Ma and Davis took some time to share their thoughts on the struggles of indie development.

You guys released FTL on the cusp of a roguelike renaissance. Why do you think players really embraced that style of game over the last few years?
Davis: That's a really big question.

Ma: I can only guess in what appealed about it to me. I think part of the reason roguelikes were so appealing at that time was there was a really strong trend for games to be handholdy, like in BioShock. You could die any number of times and it doesn't matter and there's no penalty, and if you just hit your head against the wall enough and keep putting time in, you'll win eventually. I think we were craving something from the old days, when we were young and winning wasn't guaranteed. I've never beaten Ninja Gaiden, for example, and I've never beaten the first Castlevania, but you can still have fun with the experience. I suppose that a lot of people were feeling something pretty similar.

Justin Ma

D: It's interesting though that none of those are roguelikes. I do think people can get a little bit hung up on difficulty and roguelike going hand in hand. While difficulty is a driving factor for a lot of them, I think the appeal of what it offers as a genre can spread beyond that. At the same time, I think there was a craving for more system-based gameplay, something like Spelunky where you have a lot of interlocking pieces, and it's a puzzle you have to solve as you learn the game.

Talking about complexity, FTL and Into the Breach are very dense with systems and mechanics. As designers, when do you feel like you're in a place where you're done adding systems to a game?
D: I think when you hit a point where the U.I. can't take anymore. With FTL, we had little power bars on the bottom, and those little power bars could be ionized and on fire and have intruders and be damaged and have bonus power and have battery power. You had all these mechanics crammed onto this one tiny bar, and it just couldn't take anymore.

M: We have plenty more ideas that we could add into a game, but it's one of those situations where they start interacting with each other and it gets algorithmically more complex. If we added one more base mechanic to FTL or Into the Breach, it'd be adding a thousand times as much headache.

D: Yeah, because you have to have that new mechanic interact with every previous mechanic and every iteration of every previous mechanic. If we had another tile type in Into the Breach it gets a little scary.

After finishing FTL, I heard that you both prototyped ideas separately and then brought them to each other before settling on Into the Breach. How did you find that valuable?
M: Early on, we weren't entirely certain we wanted to dive into a big game. At that time we were just having fun, I was making little ole games for fun, to challenge myself. Once Matt regained some drive for development, he started making his own prototypes. It's easier to be like, "I think this project's a good idea" once you have something to actually look at. When Matt came with the earliest prototype of Into the Breach, he just wanted some art to be able to start mocking it up, so I started thinking about it more seriously and then eventually we thought there's something here.

D: It's a case of us both finding a genre and design that we're both interested in. We both play a ton of games, but we don't overlap 100 percent on what we like.

M: We're pretty good at being loose with our attachments to a game's design. Even though it was Matt's idea originally he wasn't like, "No, you can't add this mechanic. It has to be like this." Early on, I wanted to jam in some sort of Ogre Battle SNES game-style squad mechanics that eventually got cut, but Matt humored me for a while even though he wasn't in love with that idea.

After FTL, you both moved to different corners of the world. How did that change your development process?
D: For about 90 percent of FTL's development, we were still in China together. For Into the Breach, I've been in the U.K. while Justin has been in Seattle. We've had that divide since we started the project. We saw each other maybe once in person since starting the game. But really, when we were in Shanghai, we spent most of the development time in our respective apartments, using a lot of Gchat, so it wasn't really all that different. Even in Shanghai when we did meet up, it was more for pleasure and board games than for business.

interview by Ben Reeves

Matthew Davis

Into the Breach took much longer to develop than FTL. Did you find that it was a much harder project to tackle?
D: Launching FTL was hellish from a technical support and customer service standpoint. It was enough that I was questioning if I even wanted to make another game. I felt pretty burnt out. Then it was about six to nine months after FTL, the original version, until we actually started on the advanced edition and the iPad version. It wasn't as bad after that.

M: Making this game was way harder. Figuring out what the game would be, what the game loop was, what sort of features, etc., took maybe three to five months for FTL, but it took two and a half years for Into the Breach. We literally threw out maybe a year and a half worth of work and content over time as we went through iterations of trying and failing and trying and failing. Which, frankly, was very demoralizing.

D: I feel like there is a luck factor and you just have to embrace the iteration and the exploration to find what'll work. With FTL, we got lucky fast.

M: It's funny looking back at the final product and the design and how it can look so intentional. It looks like we knew exactly what we were doing, but it really wasn't that way. The power system, the grid power, went through dozens of iterations, wrapping changes, mechanical changes, and then finally, at some point, after all this focused design we're sitting there like "Dammit, we just made ship power from FTL again." After all that, we keep going back to the same design.

You had early success with Kickstarter for FTL, so why didn't you use Kickstarter this time around? Did you consider crowdfunding for Into the Breach?
D: We were lucky with FTL's success that, financially, it wasn't necessary to do a Kickstarter. We found Kickstarter rather overwhelming with the amount of work it adds to your plate. Like FTL, we needed to make the game we wanted to make, and I think we avoided Kickstarter to have more peace of mind.

Have you guys considered consoles or making anything exclusive for a console?
M: We considered consoles for FTL, but fundamentally the UI makes it impossible to play comfortably on a gamepad, so we decided not to do it. Into the Breach, being a tactics game, is friendlier toward gamepad design, so it's definitely something we're going to investigate, but we don't have any current plans.

It seems like it's getting harder to get noticed on PC. If you look at Steam, less than .5 percent of the games make 50 percent of the money. Some people have compared Steam to a mobile app store where it's hard to sort through it all and find quality games. Have you felt that shift?
D: When we launched FTL, I think it was the only game that came out on Steam that day. It was still a closed system and easy to get a lot of publicity, and yeah, the new market for Steam is terrifying. But at the end of the day, our player base is more about that group of people than anybody else. The vast majority of hardcore FTL players have been PC players who are interested in that sort of design, so it made sense for us to focus there.

M: Hindsight is 20/20. Into the Breach is doing very well and will be able to support us going forward – that wasn't something that felt guaranteed to any degree. It's a wild west out there. I wouldn't encourage anyone to do this with any sort of risk. If you're making a game and its success or failure is paramount to you losing your savings, you should not be doing this. I don't know what the industry will look like five years from now, but I feel like we're at a precipice of something; something's going to have to shift because this sort of direction it's unsustainable for a platform like Steam. You can't have 95 percent of developers close after one project and have that be the foundation of the industry.

D: It's probably the new normal. The App Store stayed this way despite being like that for a long time.

M: But you don't have to bankrupt a company to make a mobile game usually.

D: But you just have a different sort of game cropping up to fit the new system, which is why we're stuck with crap. It wasn't like this four years ago. There's a certain amount of naivety that the world isn't going to change and we're going to be able to keep doing what we're doing.

M: That's what I'm saying. People have this sort of perception of indie games as the bright era with big, nice, small-made games, and if that just turns out to be unsustainable for 90 percent of people wanting to go into this industry, then it's going to have to shift to be, like you said, some other model.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2007
Justin Ma graduates from Tufts University in Boston with a major in Chinese East Asian studies. After saving up $15,000 from graphic-design work, he moves to Shanghai with his girlfriend.

2008
Matthew Davis graduates from UC Berkeley with a degree in electrical engineering and computer science then moves to Shanghai and quickly gets a programming job at 2K China (formerly 2K Shanghai).

2009
After Ma gets a job at 2K China, he and Davis quickly bond over their love of board games. Three months later, they are placed on the same development team for the Wii version of Top Spin 4.

2010
Davis leaves 2K and goes on a four-month bike ride across China, Laos, and Vietnam to figure out his next career move. When he returns, he convinces Ma to quit and work on a demo together.

2012
What started out as a resume builder turns into a passion project called FTL. In February, Subset launches an explosive Kickstarter that raises over $200,000. In September, the game releases to critical praise.

2014
Subset Games releases FTL: Advanced Edition, which includes new ships, events, and other elements and makes the game available for mobile devices.

2018
After a few quiet years, Subset shakes off the sophomore slump with the release of Into the Breach, a robust strategy game that currently holds a 90 on Metacritic.

Nintendo Labo

When Nintendo announced Labo, many players knew immediately if it was for them or not. If you scoffed at the hybrid craft/programming tool/toy/video game while watching the trailer, having it in your hands won't suddenly make you a believer. However, to those enamored with toys like Lego, Labo is worth a look. Well, at least one of the kits is…

by Game Informer Staff

Labo Variety Kit

This introductory Labo pack offers the most to do. It includes the cardboard and software necessary to build the RC car, fishing rod, motorcycle racing wheel, house, and piano. Building the Toy-Cons is time-consuming but fun, and the tutorials that walk you through the steps are well done. The software accompanying each Joy-Con ranges from solid entertainment to surprising versatility. The fishing and racing games don't have a lot of depth or unlockables, but are enjoyable and work well with the Labo accessories. The piano includes multi-track recording allowing you to create and record music. The Variety Kit also includes the Labo Garage, an easy-to-understand programming tool. Even with my limited creativity, we were able to make some exciting things. We can't wait to see what others create.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$69.99 | labo.nintendo.com

Labo Robot Kit

The Robot Kit is the inferior of the two Labo options. It's fun to build, but at the end of the day the robot is just a wearable box with straps and strings hanging out of it. This package includes a Kinect-like video game where you use your arms and legs to destroy a city as the robot. Just like those early motion control games, it doesn't track your movement very well. The kit also includes a creative mode where you use your arms and legs to make different noises for music, but it's hard to hear your sonic creation over the scraping of cardboard.

LIMITED APPEAL ■■■■■■□□□□

$79.99 | labo.nintendo.com

1 New Vive Pro Headset

Celebrate the Vive's two-year anniversary with a new headset. The original Vive had a resolution of 1080×1200 per eye, but the 2018 version packs 1400×1600 pixels into each eye. The new built-in headphones are also a nice idea, and they work better than a pair of earbuds, but don't have the same audio range as a high-quality over-ear headset. Unfortunately, controllers and tracking base stations are sold separately. If you have the money to burn and your eyes are begging for a higher resolution, the Vive Pro is the best VR tech on the market.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$799 (headset only) | vive.com

1

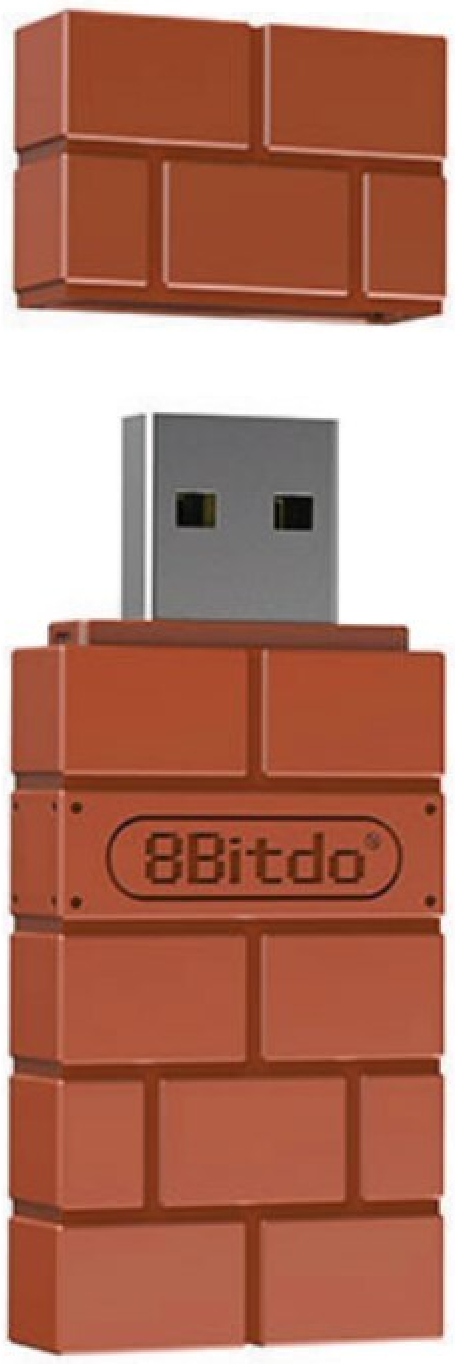
2 8Bitdo USB Wireless Controller Adapter

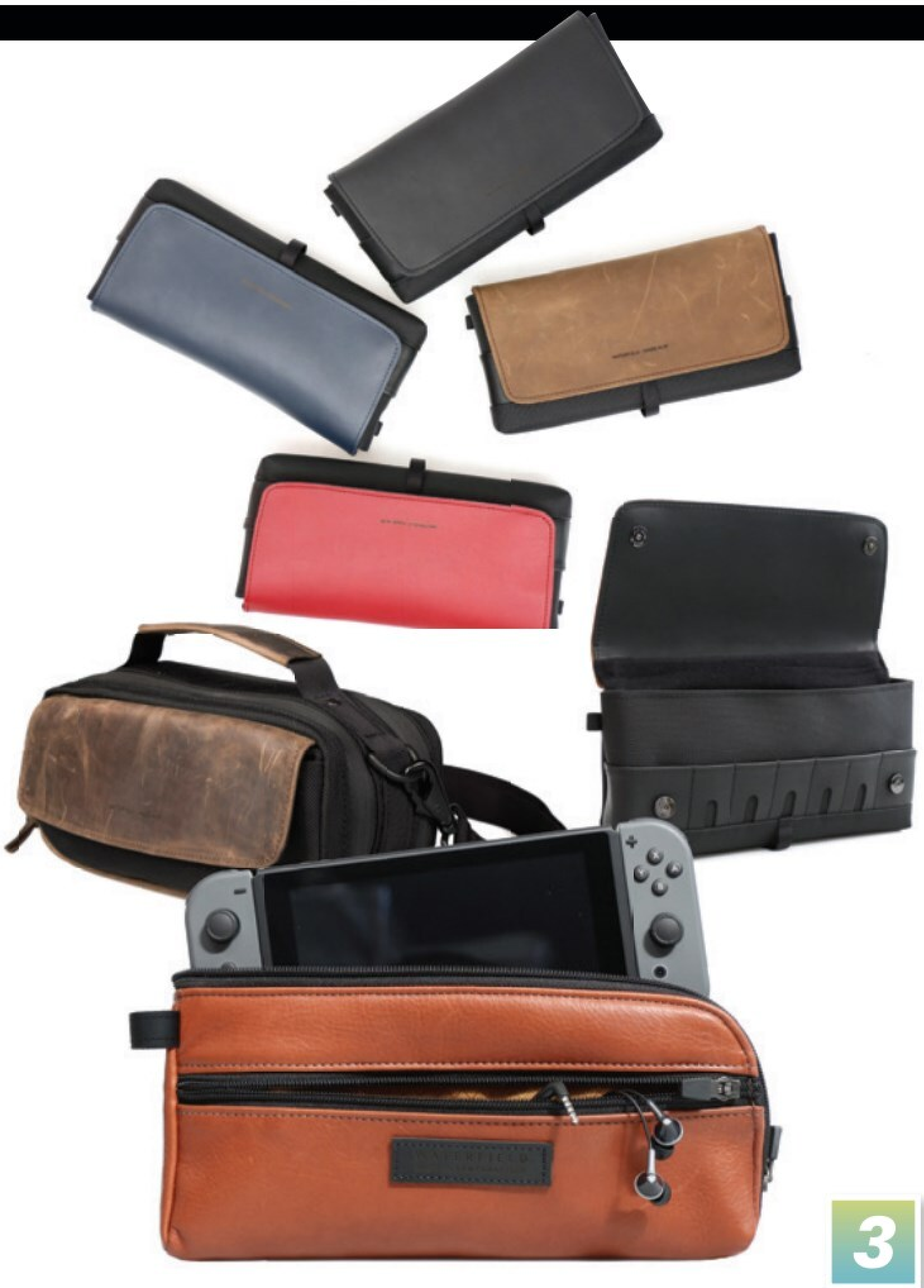
You probably have half-a-dozen gaming devices in your house, but each one needs its own controller. Why can't they all just get along! 8Bitdo's simple USB dongle converts first-party controllers for the Nintendo Switch, Xbox One, PS4, PS3, Wii, and Wii U and makes them cross compatible with Switch, PCs, Macs, and Raspberry Pi devices. The dongle's plastic feels cheap, but we love its adorable Super Mario-inspired design. Sadly, most of our controllers' headphone jacks won't work outside of their native systems, but otherwise, each controller remains fully functional – surprisingly, the PS4 controller's motion controls even translate to the Switch.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$19.99 | 8bitdo.com

2





3

3 Waterfield Switch Cases

Your Switch is precious cargo, so treat it with care. Waterfield's collection of Switch cases are so refined, your Switch will be ready to fly first class. This range of protective bags leave you with plenty of space to store your new portable console and a few games no matter how you travel. Made from waxed canvas and premium full-grain leather, these cases not only look great, they feature plush liners so soft we want to crawl inside the case and take a nap.

$49.99 (Pouch) $79.99 (CitySlicker Case) $149 (Multiplayer Pro Case) | sfbags.com

4 Netgear Nighthawk Pro Gaming XR500 Router

Sick of seeing your broadband being hogged by your other family members? The Netgear XR500 can make sure that regardless of what people in the house are streaming or downloading, your gaming sessions will take priority. Thanks to its Duma OS software suite, this dual-band wireless gigabit router gives you the power to allocate bandwidth based on your device, set up a geo filter to guarantee local server connections, and even monitor your ping delays in real-time. The foolproof setup gets your gaming walled garden up and running quickly, and while the speed tests didn't set wireless records, it still performed capably. The price may put off many, but for hardcore players who want to guarantee low latency, this luxury is worth the investment.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■□□

$299 | netgear.com

5 The C64 Mini

Nintendo and Atari get a lot of credit for their pioneering work in the video game industry, but for millions of gamers growing up in the early 1980s, the Commodore 64 was a gaming godsend. Not only was the Commodore 64 one of the most popular 8-bit home computers, it allowed user to experiment with programing their own games. This miniature version of the retro computer outputs in 720p, has built-in save game functionality, and comes with 64 pre-installed games, including California Games, Impossible Mission, Paradroid, Nebulus, and Monty Mole. Users can also add their own games via a USB drive, or plug in a keyboard and program their own games in BASIC.

$69.99 | thec64.com

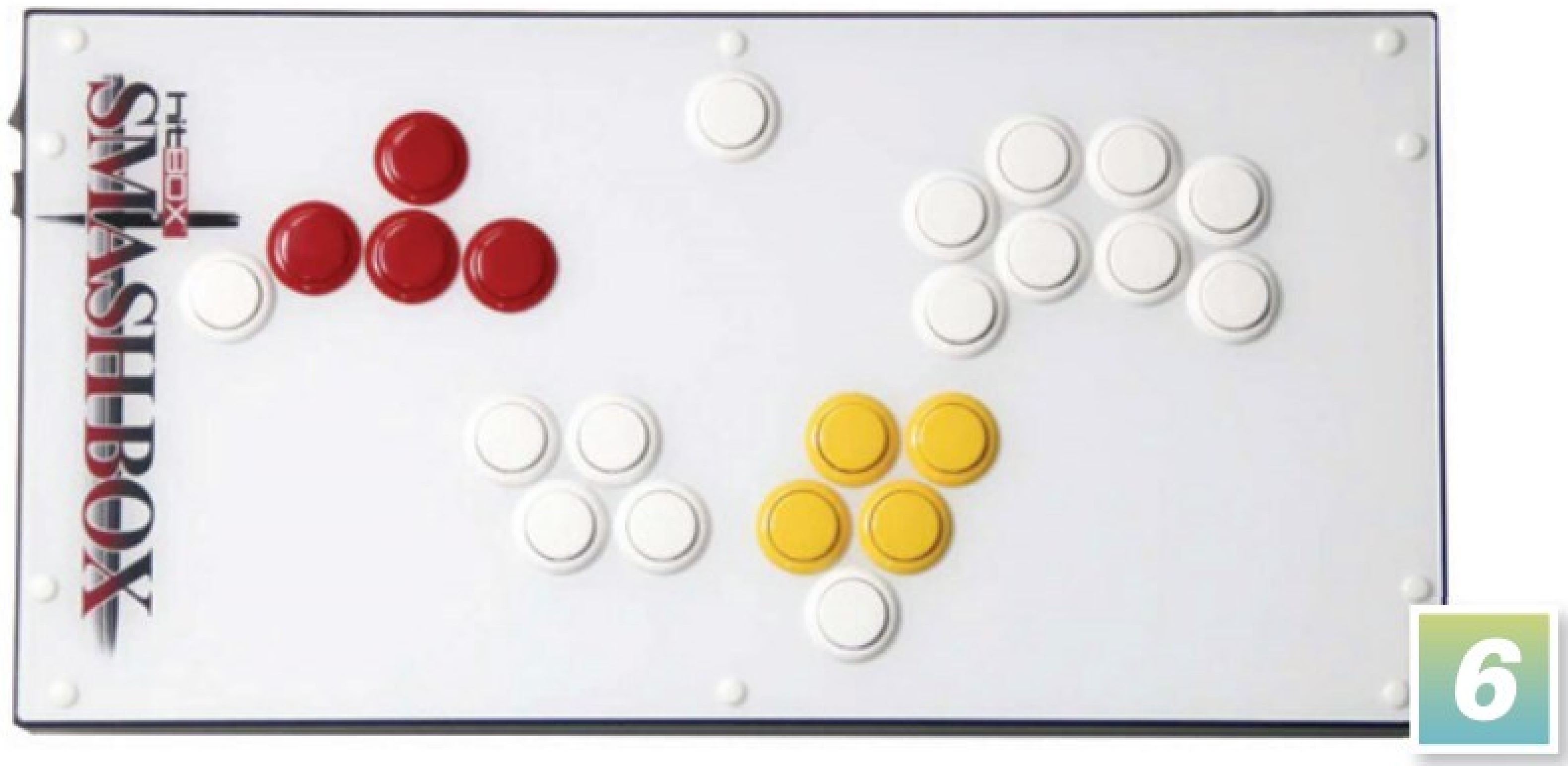
6 Hitbox Smash Box

If you're a hardcore Super Smash Bros. fan but aren't keen on how the GameCube controller is built, Hitbox has a button-based alternative. Although it takes getting used to the myriad Sanwa OBSF-24 arcade buttons, the Smash Box lets you do anything Nintendo's standard controller can do – and then some – without cramping your hands. Different buttons let you control whether you're lightly tilting the stick or double-tapping, as well as fine-tune the angle of your analog direction, allowing for less sloppy inputs once you've put in the time to learn what each button does.

You can also remap the button layout to your liking using software on the company's website, letting you mess around with different layouts to suit your needs. The Smash Box is compatible with GameCube, Wii U, and Switch (via the Wii U GameCube adapter), so you can practice with just about any entry in the series.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$199 | hitboxarcade.com



7

7 Marvel Legends Series Infinity Gauntlet

Celebrate the release of Avengers: Infinity War by bending space and time to bring home this collector-targeted version of the Mad Titan's favorite weapon. Light-up effects on the infinity stones and movie-inspired sound effects are fun, but the fully articulated finger movements let you express your inner Thanos.

$99.99 | hasbro.com

8 Brick Loot

Subscription-box services are a gamble. Sometimes you end up with a collection of toys you like; sometimes you receive an assortment of knick-knacks you'll throw away in a few months. Thankfully, Brick Loot is a subscription service that most Lego enthusiasts can get behind. Every month, Brick Loot delivers a handful of miniature building sets that are compatible with Lego bricks and similar custom building sets. Previous themes have centered on superheroes, robots, and video game arcades. Worst case scenario: You don't like one month's loot and you still have a bunch of new building blocks to add to your collection.

Starting at $24.88 | brickloot.com

8
BRICK LOOT
STUDS
www.brickloot.com
Kid Invented - AFOL Approved

9

9 Half-Life 2 & Portal 2 Figures

Back by popular demand, Neca has rereleased two of its most popular figures based on beloved Valve properties. Gordon Freeman and Chell both measure over 7-inches tall and feature more than 20-points of articulation. Chell's portal gun even emits a blue light that looks like a portal. Neca's attention to detail is so fine that neither character talks – just like in the games!

$29.99 (each) | necaonline.com

Media Shelf

A HISTORY of VIDEO GAMES
FERDK
I KILL GIANTS

A HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES IN 64 OBJECTS

Drawing on the World Video Game Hall of Fame's massive collection of memorabilia, this assortment of 64 objects tells the abridged story of the video game industry. Highlights include the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons, a World of Warcraft server blade, and a prototype of Skylanders' Portal of Power.

$26.99
harpercollins.com

GLORY TO METAL (A SYMPHONIC METAL TRIBUTE TO NIER: AUTOMATA)

Ferdk remixes Keiichi Okabe's critically acclaimed soundtrack, creating a unique symphonic metal jam. This mix of hard-hitting drums and heavy guitars meshes well with Neir's orchestral soundtrack, which already had us raising our fists as we smashed through hordes of soulless machines.

$4.00
ferdk.bandcamp.com

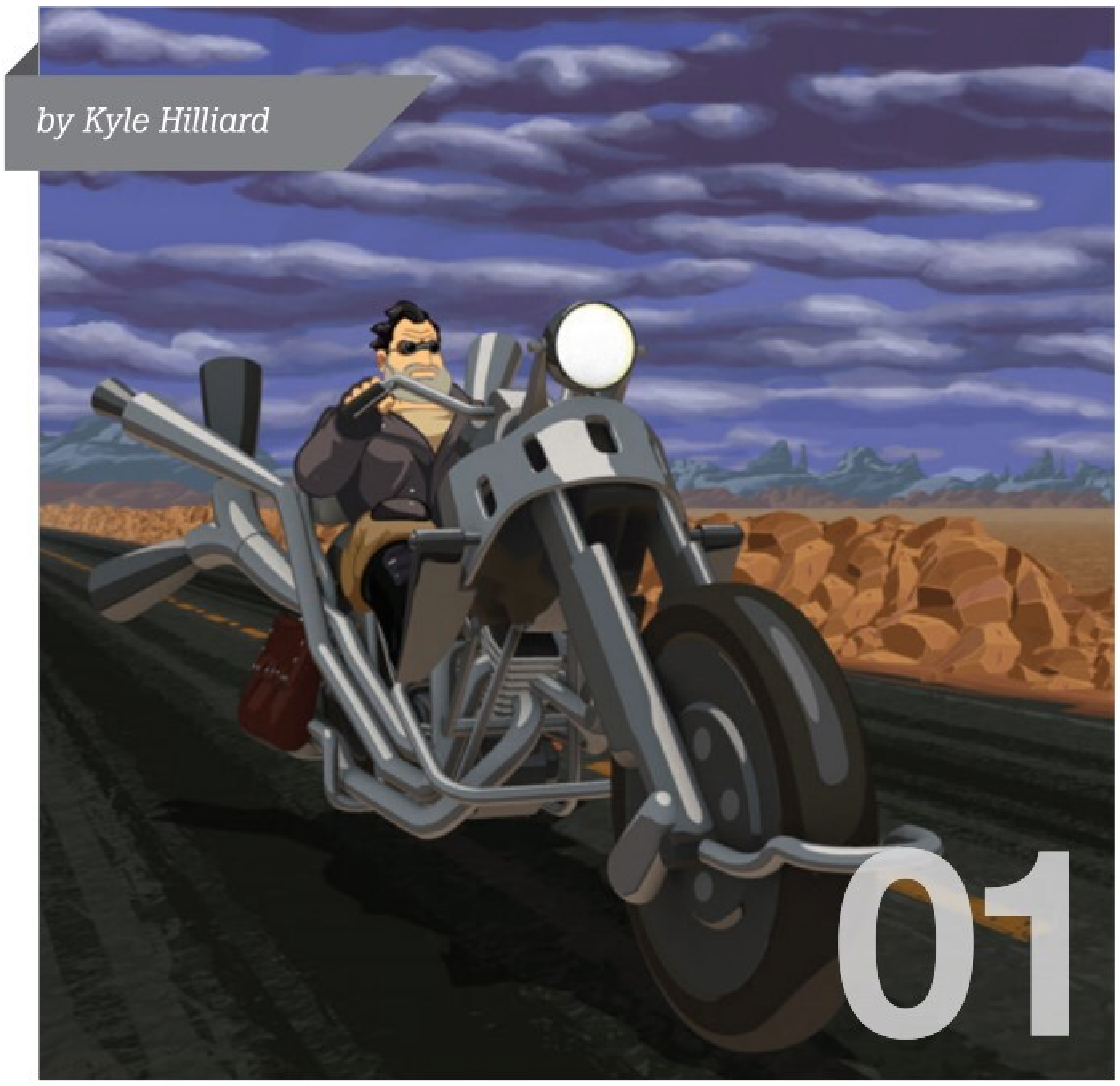
I KILL GIANTS FIFTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Barbara Thorson is a fifth-grader with a past so troubling she retreats into a fantasy where she kills giants with an ancient Norse warhammer. Unfortunately, the biggest giant in her life might be real. This fifth anniversary edition of the International Manga Award-winning miniseries includes interviews with the creators, concept designs, and more.

$19.99
imagecomics.com

MOTORCYCLES

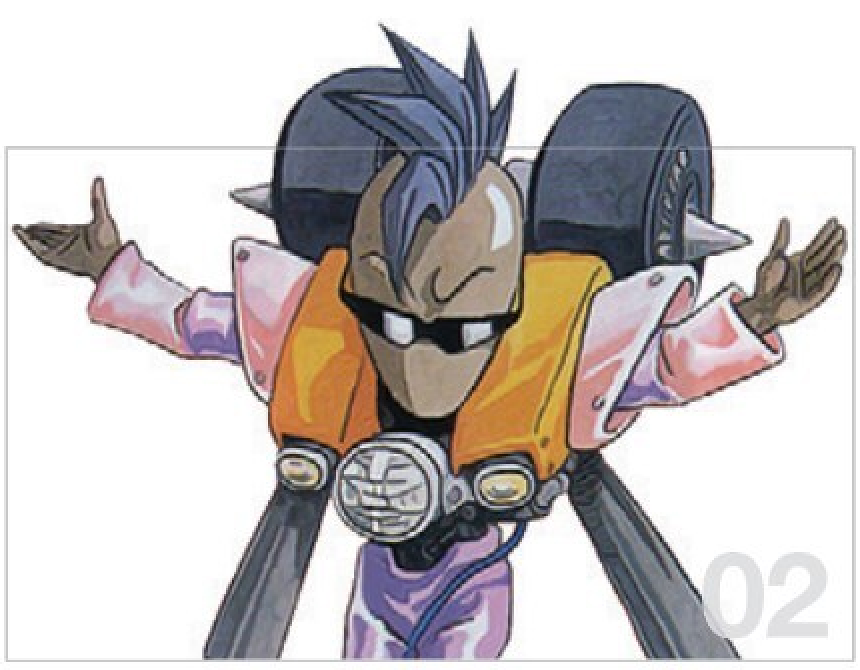
by Kyle Hilliard



Ben's Bike

Full Throttle

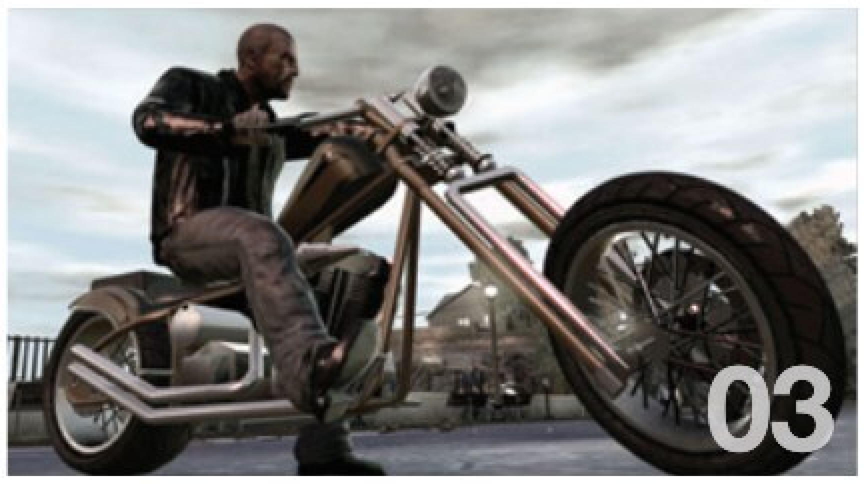
Video game motorcycles are as fun to drive as they are to crash, and even when you don't control them, they serve as extensions of our favorite characters. Case in point – Ben's bike in Full Throttle. The game's opening credits take time to zoom in on every element of the bike to let the player take it all in.



Johnny

Chrono Trigger

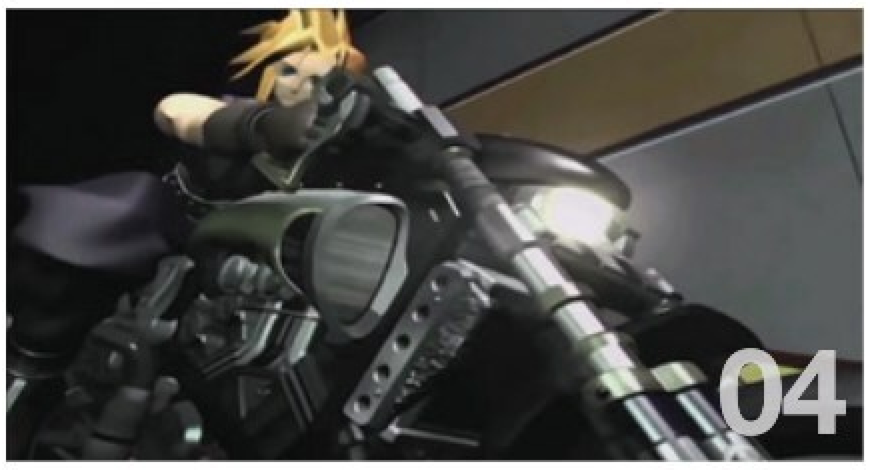
In a game full of memorable characters, Johnny and his ability to be both person and motorcycle stands out. He never joins your party, but you do race him in order to get through Site 32, which leads to a surprising sequence unlike anything else in the game.



Johnny's Hexer

Grand Theft Auto IV

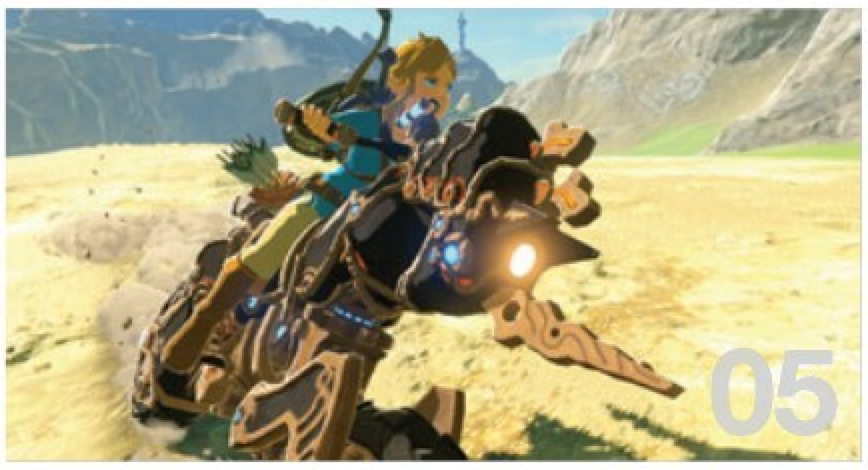
The GTA series is no stranger to motorcycles, but the Lost & Damned DLC is the first time the series went all in on biker culture. Playing as Johnny Klebitz and driving around Liberty City on his Hexer delivered on the dark fantasy of being in a motorcycle gang.



Hardy-Daytona

Final Fantasy VII

Seeing Cloud on his motorcycle is one of those, "This is the future of video games!" moments that Final Fantasy VII delivered in spades. For the sequel film, Advent Children, Cloud's new motorcycle even became the centerpiece of an impressive action sequence.



Master Cycle Zero

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

After watching the Guardians control their own Divine Beasts, Link finally got his own with the Master Cycle Zero. It changes how Link moves through the world, you can feed it meat and veggies, it looks awesome, and it's a freaking motorcycle in a fantasy adventure game.

Johanna

Persona 5

This series' titular Personas tend to manifest as impressive, and powerful monsters, but that is not the case for Makoto Niijima. When she experiences her awakening, it takes the form of on awesome motorcycle named Johanna, which Makoto can ride.

Lady's Motorcycle

Devil May Cry 3

Lady's motorcycle has multiple uses in Devil May Cry 3. It's a standard motorcycle, a mountain scaler, a melee weapon, and a bomb. Dante takes Lady's wheels from her in order to ride up the side of a demonic tower, hits demons with it while flying through the air, and then blows it up.

Wario Bike

WarioWare

Wario started riding his garish yellow and red bike when he, somewhat arbitrarily, decided he was a biker guy in WarioWare. Now he is rarely seen without it. Other than being a point A to point B machine, Wario also found a way to weaponize it to great effect in Super Smash Bros.

Trike

Brütal Legend

Despite its diminutive name, the Trike from Brütal Legend is an impressive vehicle made from parts of a dead metal spider queen. It might as well be a car based on its size, and it's used to deliver to life-restoring bass guitar strings to Lemmy "Kill Master" Kilmister.

Schpeltiger

No More Heroes

Like all of Suda51's "trips," No More Heroes is a strange game. Its protagonist, Travis Touchdown, has a weird vehicle to match. The Schpeltiger is bulky and hard to turn, but is undeniably charming and crucially important to the bizarre experience that is No More Heroes. ◆

June2018

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 05
- BlazBlue: Cross Tag Battle (PS4, Switch, PC)
- The Elder Scrolls Online: Summerset (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Onrush (PS4, Xbox One)
- Shaq Fu: A Legend Reborn (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- Vampyr (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ①

Thursday 07
- MotoGP (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 08
- Sushi Striker: The Way of Sushido (Switch, 3DS)

Tuesday 12
- Jurassic World Evolution (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Super Bomberman R (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 15
- Lego: The Incredibles (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Friday 22
- Mario Tennis Aces (Switch)
- New Gundam Breaker (PS4, PC)

Tuesday 26
- Far Cry 3: Classic Edition (PS4, Xbox One)
- Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of Dana (Switch)

Friday 29
- The Crew 2 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- MXGP Pro (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 01
- Action Point (theaters)

Saturday 02
- FLCL (Adult Swim)

Thursday 07
- American Woman (Paramount)
- Cloak & Dagger (Freeform)

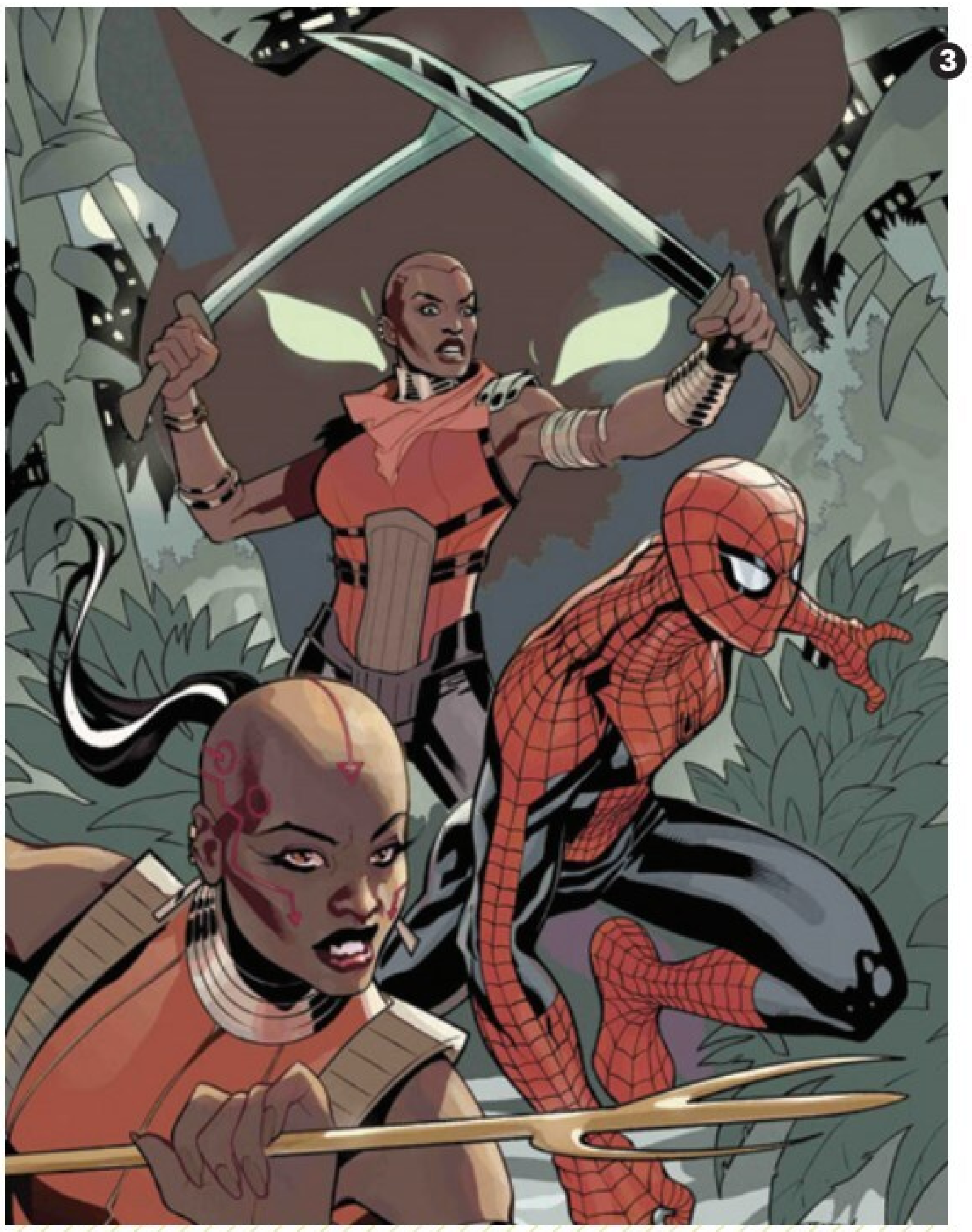
Friday 08
- Ocean's 8 (theaters)

Friday 15
- Incredibles 2 (theaters) ②
- Tag (theaters)

Wednesday 20
- Yellowstone (Paramount)

Friday 22
- Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom (theaters)
- Luke Cage (Netflix)

Friday 29
- Sicario: Day of the Soldado (theaters)



GAMER CULTURE

Friday 01

The Man of Steel

DC Comics is releasing an issue of its new Man of Steel series each week for the entire month of June. This series is penned by Brian Michael Bendis, with art by Adam Hughes, and covers by Ivan Reise and Joe Prado. A threat from Superman's past returns and the fate of Clark's wife and son hang in the balance.

Tuesday 12

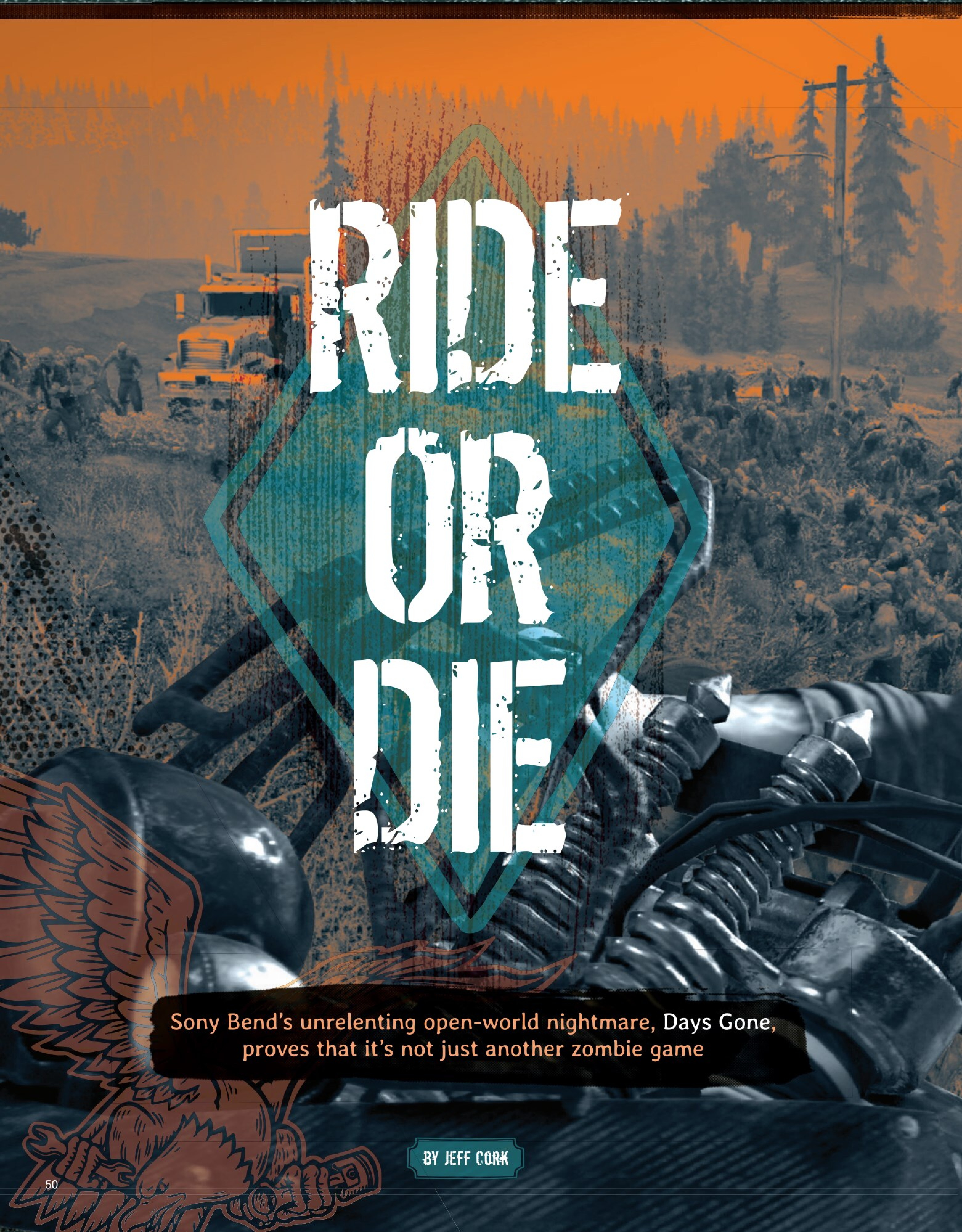
E3 2018

The biggest show in video games returns to Los Angeles for a week of reveals and news. We're hoping we get our first look at the new Smash Bros. and Pokémon titles for Switch. On Sony's end, we expect to see The Last of Us: Part II and Ghosts of Tsushima. Xbox's lineup hasn't given us much for 2018 and beyond, but Halo has been strangely absent. Maybe this is the year it returns. Check out gameinformer.com this week for up-to-the-minute news.

Wednesday 13

Wakanda Forever: Amazing Spider-Man ③

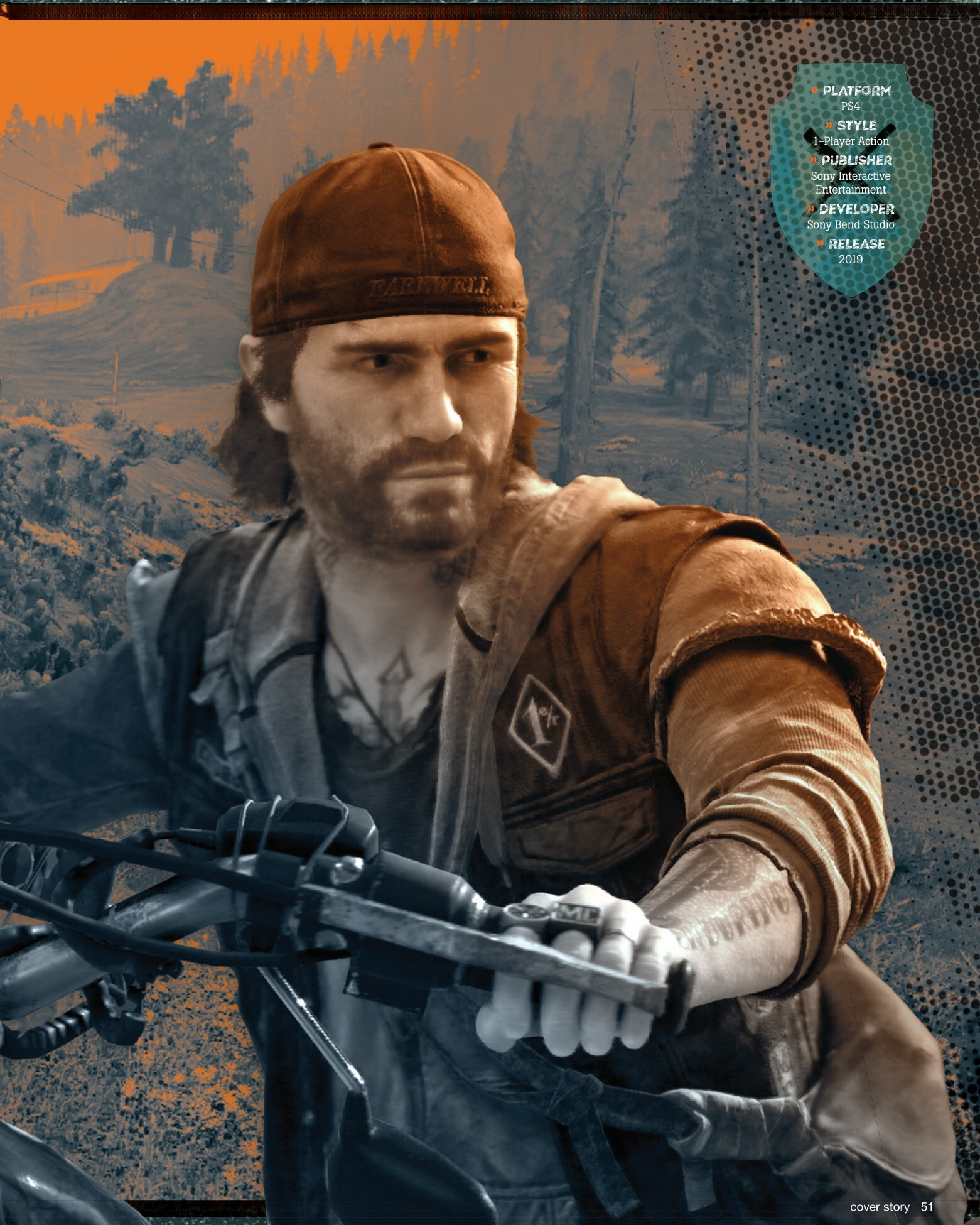
In a new Marvel comic series, the Dora Milaje is leaving Wakanda to investigate a threat in New York City. The Dora Milaje's path intertwines with Spider-Man's. With his help, Okoye, Ayo, and Aneka travel the globe to protect their secret society. ◆



RIDE OR DIE

Sony Bend's unrelenting open-world nightmare, **Days Gone**, proves that it's not just another zombie game

BY JEFF CORK



» PLATFORM
PS4

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
Sony Bend Studio

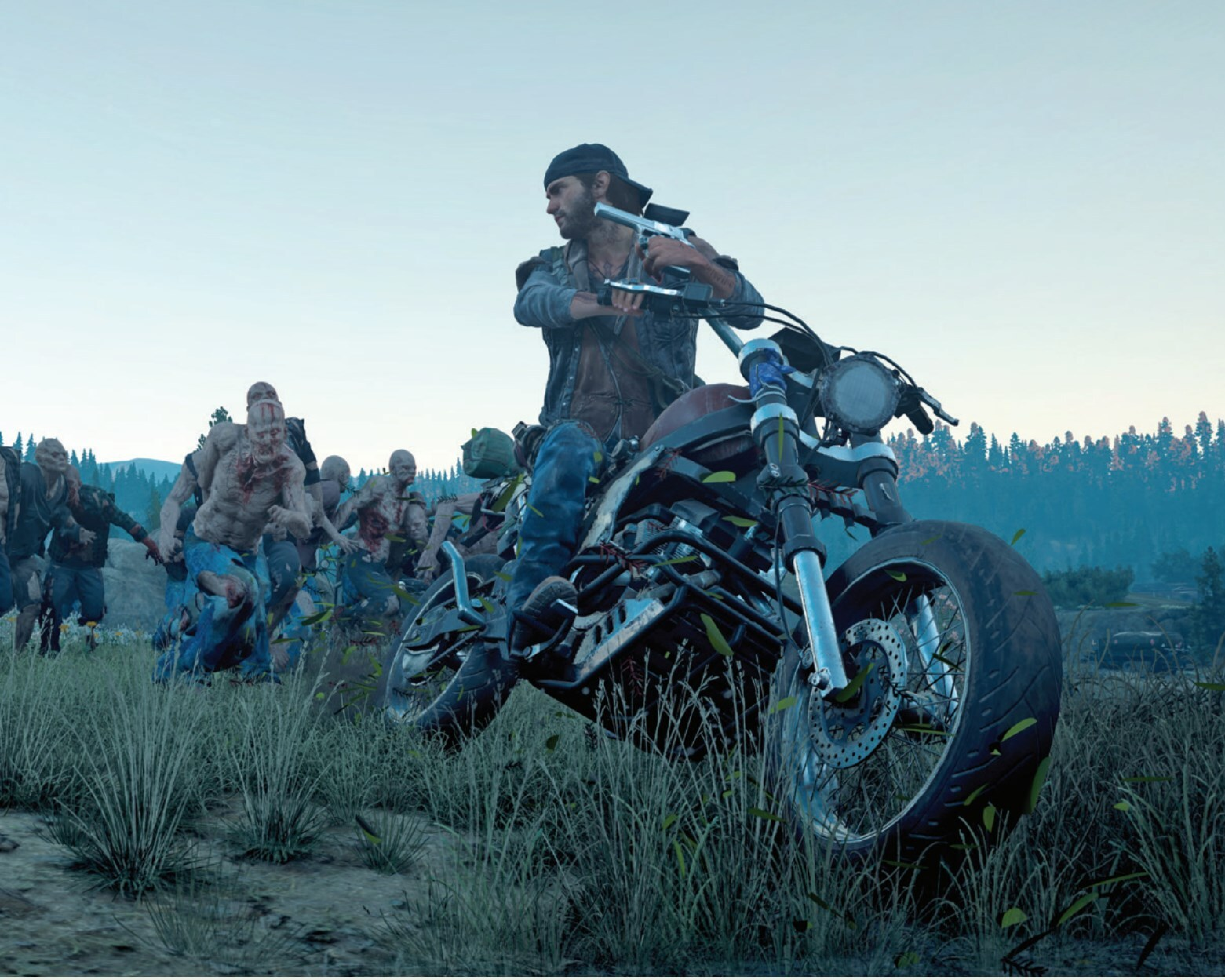
» RELEASE
2019

Deacon St. John's motorcycle launches into the air after hitting a particularly tempting earthen ramp. There's no fanfare. The camera doesn't slow down or jump to a dramatic angle. The words "Sick stunt!" are nowhere to be seen. When the bike slams back to earth, it's accompanied by a crunchy thud and an indicator that the landing rattled more than Deacon's fillings. The exhaust is now belching out black smoke, which isn't great. In fact, it could be a death sentence. In Days Gone, that vehicle is more than a means of transportation – it's a lifeline. Deacon stops to make repairs, knowing that he's far from alone in the Oregon woods. He'll have to act quickly. Night is coming. And so are they.

"It's been five years since we started development on this thing," says John Garvin, Days Gone's creative director. "When we rolled off of [Uncharted:] Golden Abyss, we were like, 'Hey, what do you guys want to do?' and the first thing that came to mind was an open-world biker zombie game. So that's what we launched into."

In that time, the studio has doubled its initial team of about 50 to more than 100 developers, given a couple of E3 stage presentations, and faced its share of blowback about whether the world needs yet another zombie game. Those E3 demos showed the game could throw hundreds of speedy enemies at the player, but the core of Days Gone remained a mystery. What would players be doing in the open world? How was the game structured? And, well, does the world need yet another zombie game?

We recently spent a couple of days at the Oregon studio's spacious new offices, playing the game and getting to know the people behind it. Thanks to some extensive hands-on time, we came away with a much better sense



of what Days Gone is – and isn't. If you have an immediate and incurable revulsion toward all things undead, you may not be converted. On the other hand, players bored with the current state of open-world games should take notice. Once you get past the hordes of infected, it's a grounded take on a genre in desperate need for some new blood.

DESPERATE TIMES

Days Gone starts in the middle of a mission. If you're looking for an explanation – or even a hint – about what happened to Oregon, you won't find it in the opening hour. Instead, the sequence is a slow burn that establishes the relationship between outlaw biker Deacon St. John and his MC buddy, Boozer, as they track down a stolen cache of drugs.

"Just so you know, Jeff and I are the kind of developers who don't mind being dumped into a situation and are forced to figure s--- out on our own," Garvin jokes, referring to game director Jeff Ross. Disorientation is quickly replaced with tension; Deacon and Boozer find the thief, but Deacon's motorcycle is hobbled in the altercation. The situation escalates from there, with the duo forced to forage for a replacement part in a garage on the other side of an infested tunnel.

Days Gone picks up several years after a viral pandemic ravages the country – and most likely, the rest of the world. The people unfortunate enough to have been infected by the virus are called several names. NERO, the National Emergency Response Organization, calls them "infected." Everyone else calls these frightening creatures by their colloquial name: freakers. Whatever word you use, the victims are feral, bloodthirsty, and yet unmistakably human. Tattered clothing hangs on their gaunt frames, serving as a reminder of the people they once were. Linger on that thought too long, however, and you're likely to get bitten, joining the ravenous herd in the process.

Deacon and Boozer have been surviving together for the past few years, hunting the freakers and doing odd jobs for some of the encampments that have sprung up. These makeshift mini societies offer a semblance of structure and law and order, which is probably why the outlaw bikers have carved out their own paths. For them, survival is the goal, but not at the expense of freedom. While the player might want answers, that's not what drives Deacon. "Our plotline is not about you finding a cure for the virus," Garvin says. "It's not about that."

Boozer is a patient companion, at one point reminding Deacon about the importance of taking the time to assess the surroundings. "You've got to know this s---, bro," he says. "What are you going to do if something happens to me?" His words prove prophetic, after an encounter with a crazed group of acetylene-torch-wielding maniacs leaves Boozer incapacitated with third-degree burns. To make matters worse, Deacon's bike is stolen and stripped for parts.

Deacon gets his friend back to their hideout, in a former watch tower, but now he faces a new set of responsibilities: ensuring that his friend recovers from those catastrophic injuries and replacing his motorcycle. To further complicate things, he can't complete these tasks alone.

Freakers have a tendency to live in and around dark areas, such as caves and tunnels. Proceed with caution

MEDICAL LEAVE

Deacon may not know who, specifically, stole his bike, but the trail leads straight to a man named Copeland and his encampment. Deacon and Boozer have scraped out a living in the wilds through ingenuity, luck, and more than a bit of stubborn determination. Not everyone has what it takes to do that, which is where the encampments come in.

"There are five encampments in the world, and each one of them has a very different view of what survival means and what does rebuilding civilization mean," Garvin says. "But they all have one thing in common, which is they need people who aren't criminals to live there and contribute, to help them get stronger, to help them rebuild, grow crops, and do all that stuff. And Deacon refuses to do that."

While he has worked with encampments and their leaders over the years, Deacon's avoided forging long-term commitments with any particular factions. Instead, he and Boozer take a mercenary approach to life in what Garvin and the team call "the s---," meaning any place outside the range of these encampments. Now that Boozer's out of the picture for the foreseeable future, Deacon must work with the leaders in ways that may have made him bristle only days before. This so-called drifter has to settle down a little.

First up is a visit to Copeland's camp. Copeland is a survivalist with an impressive set of scars that swipe across his face. He's a constitutionally oriented patriot, even though remnants of America are as tattered as the flags that fly throughout his camp. Deacon isn't impressed. "Try going hungry for three days," he tells the leader. "There ain't no such thing as a starving patriot." After some tense back-and-forth, Copeland offers Deacon a proposition: Bring the stolen drugs to Copeland, and do a few other runs for the leader. As a down payment, Deacon can ride out on a replacement bike – crappy as it may be.

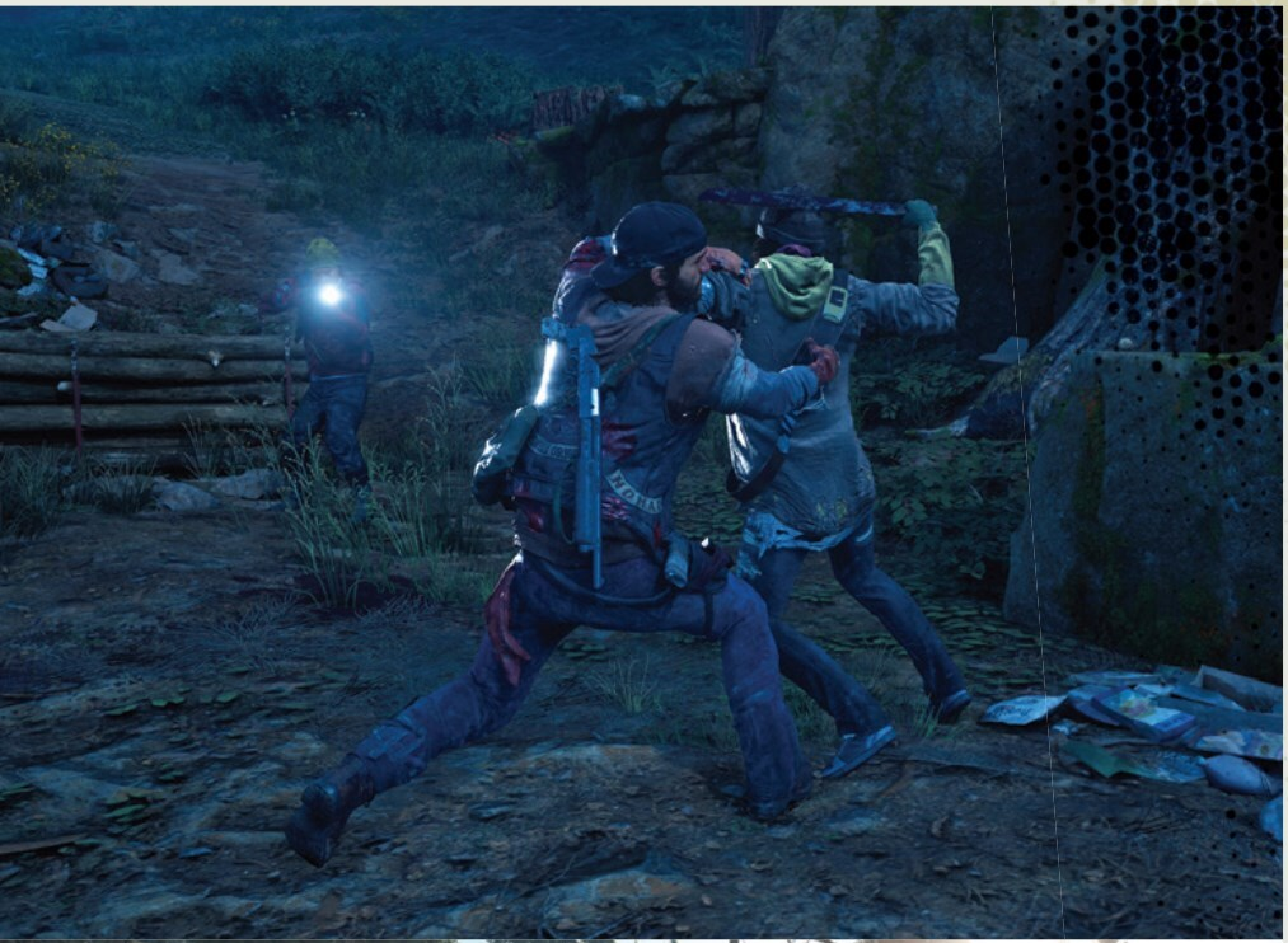
And it is crappy. Compared to Deke's starting bike, this new motorcycle is sluggish and handles poorly. It struggles to make tight turns on what remains of the asphalt, let alone the muddy trails that comprise most of my travels. If nothing else, its poor performance is an incentive to do some jobs, so I can get some upgrades from Copeland's mechanic, Manny, ASAP.

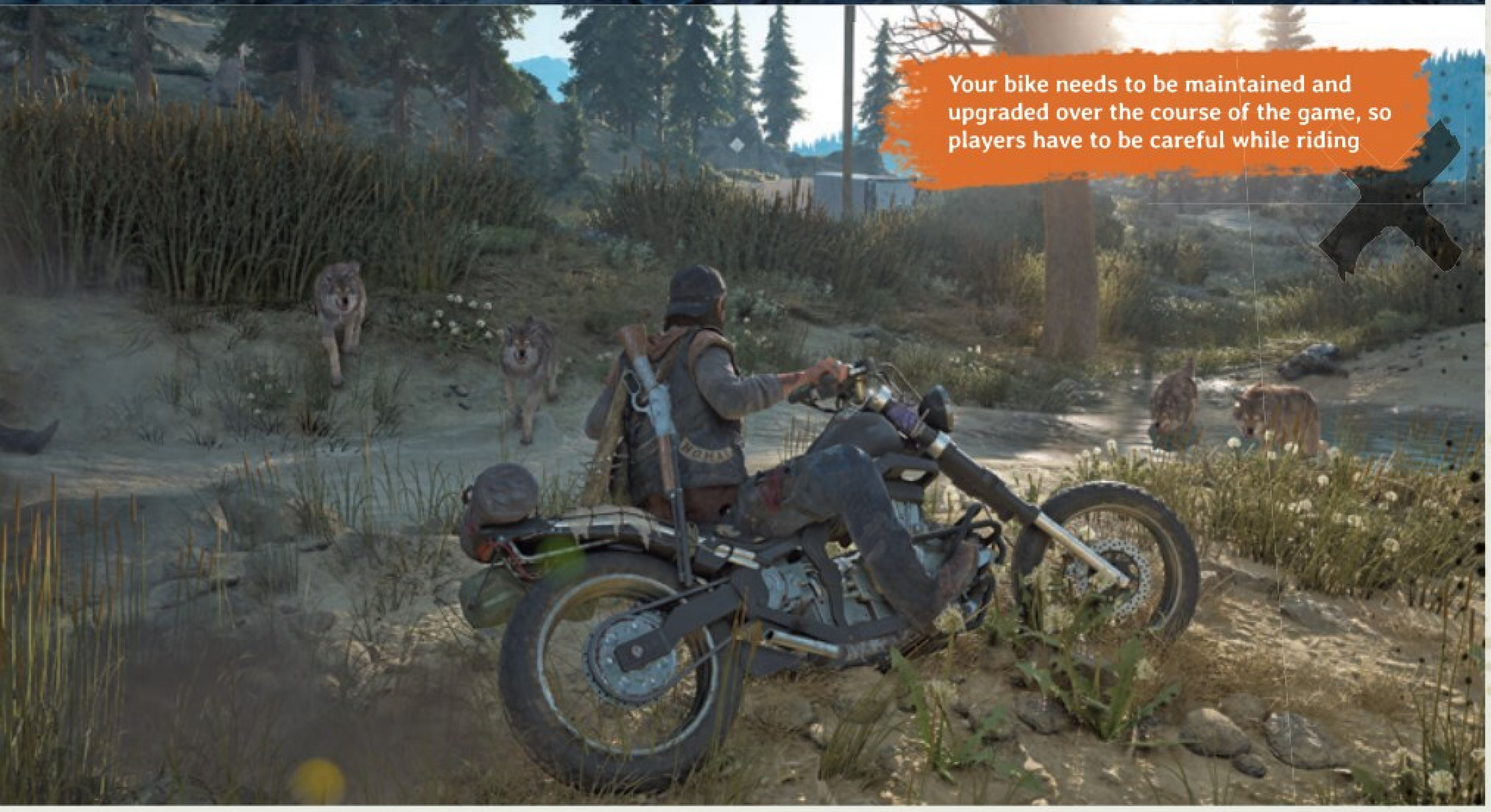
Before that, I need to make sure Boozer is going to be all right. Now that the game's linear beginning stretch is finished, I'm free to roam the open roads. Still, I have a sense of responsibility to my friend, so I decide to make his recovery a priority. His wound isn't going to get better on its own, and I make a beeline for the closest NERO checkpoint.

"These NERO checkpoints are abandoned medical processing areas," says Eric Jensen, lead open-world designer. "They set up all these checkpoints throughout the regions and basically used them to stop people to see if they were sick, pull them aside and treat them if possible, and quarantine them if necessary."

The site has long been abandoned, though remnants of its chaotic history are present. The checkpoint is on a stretch of highway near a tunnel, and several cars and trucks have been abandoned haphazardly nearby. My goal is to get inside a trailer complex, which NERO set up during the height of the pandemic. Unfortunately, the electronic door is sealed. I barely take a step away from the door before I'm attacked by a lone freaker. It hisses at me, then lunges. I'm taken by surprise, and it manages to lock its arms around my neck, leaning in for a bite. I free myself by jamming a button, and shove it away before smashing its head in with a wooden bat.

It may have been alone, but that encounter





Your bike needs to be maintained and upgraded over the course of the game, so players have to be careful while riding

reminded me of how deadly these things can be. A single swipe from its clawed hands ticked off a quarter of my health. "It's an extremely dangerous world, and it's always dangerous," says lead designer Ron Allen. I'm inclined to believe him.

I activate Deacon's survival vision, which desaturates the colors and highlights items of interest. It points me toward a cluster of nearby cars. People left in a hurry, and the apocalypse is still relatively fresh. For me, that means trunks and other stashes may not have been completely looted by now. Sure enough, the trunk of a police car contains a bounty of ammo, and I grab some scrap after popping a sedan's hood. Scrap is particularly valuable in this world, acting as a one-size-fits all component for crafting and repairing Deacon's bike. I also find a rag, and use it to craft a bandage.

On the other side of the NERO base, I stumble across a dormant generator. It's out of fuel, but I find a gas can in the back of a tow truck near the tunnel entrance. I fuel up the generator and pop it on by slamming the starter with my palm. It hums back to life, granting me access to the facility's interior. Unfortunately, it's never that easy. In my haste to get the generator started, I neglected to fully scout out the area. If I had, I would have noticed a pair of speakers mounted on the top of the building's roof. Now that power has been restored, they're screeching out automated evacuation orders. I'm not the only set of ears getting the message.

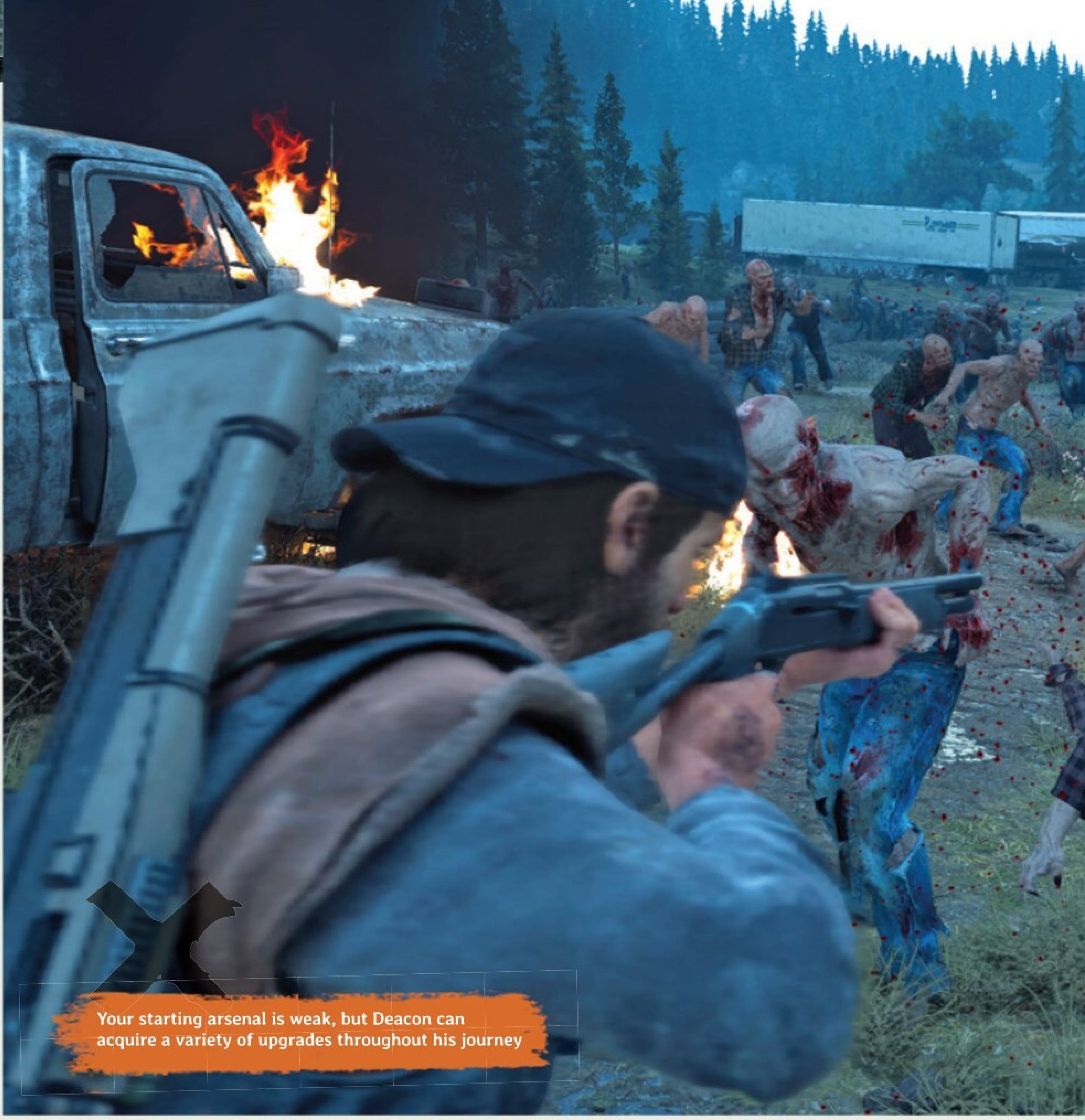
CHOICES CARRY

Player choice is a staple of open-world games, and Days Gone is no different. That freedom also extends to its narrative through moments when the player has to choose between several options. In one early example, players have to leave their incapacitated friend behind at their safe house. Before hitting the door, players can choose to take Boozer's shotgun or leave it with him.

"It's one of the ways we're trying to give the player some agency and give Deacon some commitment toward his friendship," says creative director John Garvin. "These are all choices you make, and they're all choices. Taking Boozer's shotgun hurts Boozer's feelings – there's no other way to say it. That will have an impact over the course of the game, and the tradeoff is real. If you play with that shotgun, it's a powerful shotgun."

In addition to potentially hurting feelings and getting access to powerful weapons, Garvin says these choices – which are all focused around Boozer and Deacon – have consequences that include different endings for the game.

About a half dozen infected stream into the area from the nearby woods, ably scrambling up and over the barbed-wire-topped fences. I retreat, backing myself into the dead end of the U-shaped facility. I ready my Winchester 1887 shotgun and take aim at a freaker who's rounding a corner. Unfortunately, I wasn't paying attention to the ones who climbed up and over the structures. I'm quickly overwhelmed. Deacon kicks one away, rolls just out of reach of another, and manages to retreat with just barely a sliver of health remaining. I pause to reload and take out the ghouls with shots to their bellies – zombie rules don't necessarily apply here. In fact, it pays to avoid giving into your headshot instincts; freaker ears are used as a proof of bounty kills for encampments, and can provide a reputation boost by cashing them in. I climb up onto the roof and cut the wires for the speakers before they attract any additional unwanted attention.



Your starting arsenal is weak, but Deacon can acquire a variety of upgrades throughout his journey

This intense encounter provided a nicely harsh introduction to one of Days Gone's rules. That's exactly what Garvin is looking for. "There's a contingent of hand holders who are like, 'No, let me go into survival-vision mode and see the speakers up there and have hint text that comes up and says, "Before you turn the power on, be sure to turn those speakers off."' To me, that ruins immersion," he says. "I think the real question is how punishing is the learning. Now you know. That's kind of what we did throughout the game. We don't want to telegraph everything to the player. We want them to figure stuff out, and not be too punishing if they don't."

After I've had a chance to catch my breath, I drop down to the ground and give the electronic door another try. It opens. Inside, I find a case containing sterile bandages for Boozer's arm, as well as a piece of NERO tech in the form of an injector. With it, I can upgrade Deacon's stats, increasing his health, stamina, or time-slowing focus ability – provided I've unlocked that particular skill. I opt for additional stamina, since I'm learning that running away is probably the best way to stay alive, at least during this early phase of the game. At a minimum, I'm definitely lacking in firepower.

"The guns themselves aren't maintained in this world – it's been raining for two years in Oregon, and they've had all this weather on them, and they aren't meant to be railguns or perfect guns," says lead designer Jeff Ross. "There are weapons in the upgrade path that are better, but we really wanted to embrace the idea that people are afraid when they're shooting and they aren't American Sniper; they aren't going to get every shot. That is on purpose, and it does get better."

Now that the site is cleared and I've taken the upgrade, an indicator pops up saying that I've looted one of the region's 12 checkpoints. It also opens up a weapons locker, which lets me access all of the weapons I've purchased and do some in-the-field swapping. More critically, I've unlocked it as a fast-travel location, as well as a respawn area in the world if (or more accurately, when) I die. I grab everything else that isn't nailed down, including a load of sterilizer solution, bandages, and medkits. The longer I can go between respawns, the better, if for no other reason than pride.

"We do make the player earn everything here, like fast travel," Ross says. "We don't let you travel through the world carelessly. You must have deliberately been through it and worked hard, cleared it out. The same thing with respawn locations. What I've found is that it really increases the tension – you don't want to die when you're going to lose this much travel time."

I get back on my bike and return to the watchtower. It's starting to get dark outside, which isn't great. The infected don't like light, so they tend to hide indoors or in their nests when possible – though rain and clouds will draw them out. At night, they're stronger and more aggressive, and you're even more likely to run into them. Considering how poorly that last encounter went during the day, I hit the throttle and try to make decent time.

On a trail, I see a lone freaker running along on the other side of a creek. Spooked, I turn around and go over a wooden bridge, past a waterfall. It's now raining, and the bike slides a bit more aggressively around corners. An indicator in the corner shows it has 86-percent health remaining, so I need to keep it on the

Copeland runs one of the encampments, ruling with a strong sense of patriotic duty for an America that no longer exists

trail as much as possible. So of course I slide wide around a corner and hit a tree. Now it's down to 64 percent. Great. Fortunately, home is right around the corner – provided I can stay upright on my way there.

I give Boozer the bandages, and then reload my ammo in our hideout's storage lockers. Boozer is at least temporarily out of commission, and his presence is mostly relegated to being a voice on the radio. How does the team prevent him from sounding like a nag with a to-do list? Garvin came up with a clever solution. "Every time you go back to the safehouse, that locker is replenished with ammo. So we bribe you," he jokes. It works. Boozer is all right with me.

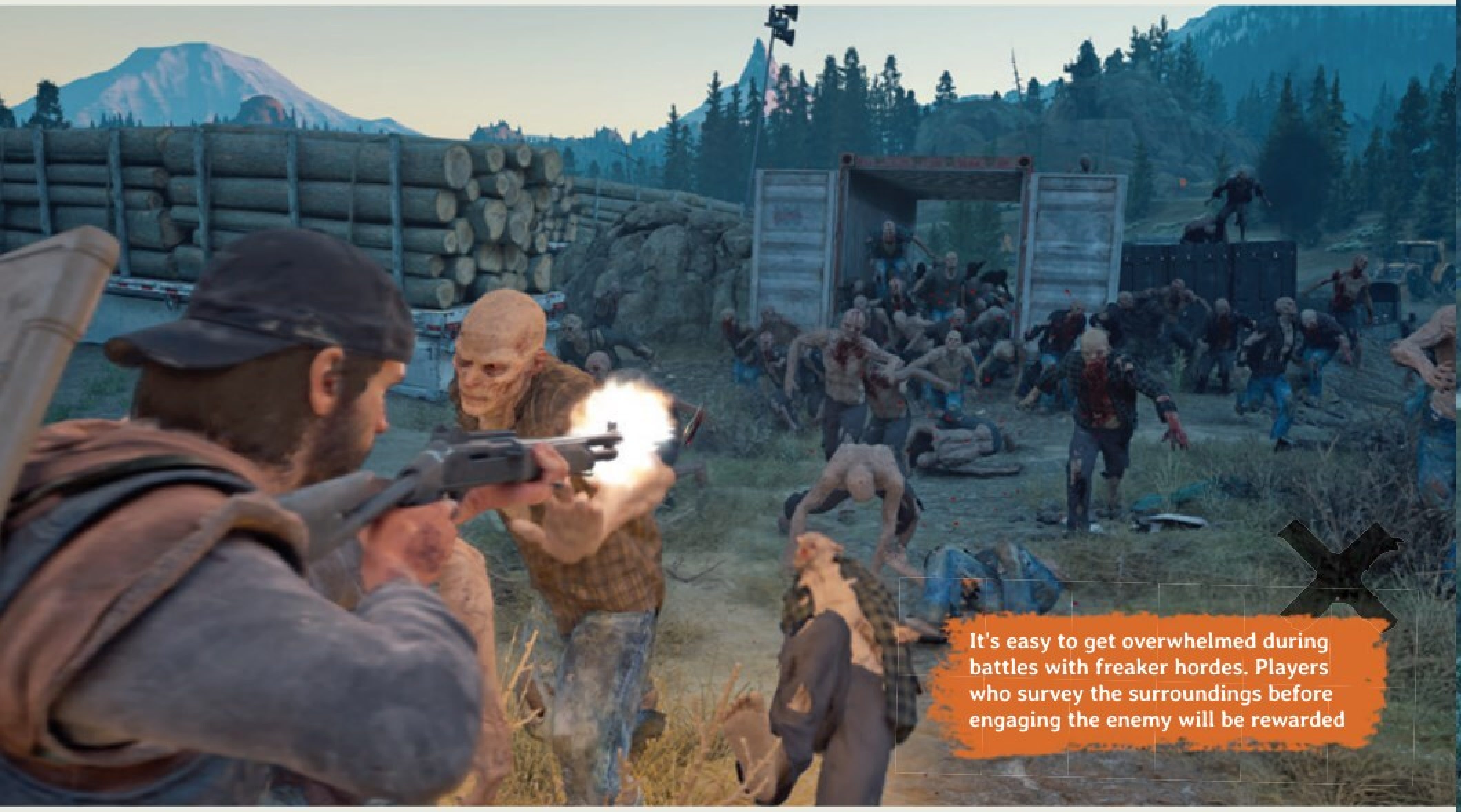
Now that I'm confident that I've done all I can do for my buddy (for the time being, at least), I turn my attention to Copeland's request. Apparently his radio transmitter has stopped functioning, and he wants me to check it out. Copeland may be absorbed in "paranoid truther bulls---," Deacon says in one colorful exchange, but he also provides a valuable service. His camp is the best place to get bike parts, so if he's happy, I'm happy. Considering the current state of my motorcycle, any and all improvements are welcome.

WHO IS DEACON ST. JOHN?

Even after spending several hours with him, I couldn't give you much more than a superficial read on Deacon St. John. He's the enforcer of an outlaw motorcycle club, The Mongrels. He's still dealing with the loss of his wife, Sarah, which happened during the start of the pandemic. And he's fiercely loyal to his buddy and MC brother, Boozer.

I asked creative director John Garvin to help fill in some of the gaps, and he was reluctant to provide specifics. It all comes down to the challenges of telling stories in an open world, he says. These games can take 30 or more hours to complete, and players are constantly bombarded with distractions. "How do you keep a player interested?" he asks. "My answer to that is by not giving away all the information up front."

Some of those deeper details, such as what exactly happened to Sarah, will be explained through playable flashback missions that he says will happen fairly early in the game. "You're not learning much about Deacon at the very start, because we're holding out. By design. ... By the end of the game, you know exactly who he is."



It's easy to get overwhelmed during battles with freaker hordes. Players who survey the surroundings before engaging the enemy will be rewarded

Talking with Sony Bend, it's clear the team is pushing for a consistent tone throughout the game, which is something that open-world games have struggled to achieve. It's a dark, sad story, but Ross says great care has been taken to ensure that characters act as real people might – there aren't straight men or people who only exist to provide comic relief. Humor is present, to be sure, but it comes naturally, like how Boozer and Deacon poke at each other like longtime friends. That extends to the world overall.

Sony Bend Studio's vision for Oregon features the heavily wooded forests you might expect to find in the Pacific Northwest, as well as the comparatively flatter sections of the high desert. There are also larger towns to explore, but Bend (called by its original name of "Farewell" in the game) isn't one of them. "Everything you see is real," Garvin says. "It's Disneyland scale, so everything is moved around depending on where we need it, but it's real."

"As developers, I think we can all get better at making the worlds be more interactive in a more believable, interactive sense, and not just in a gaming sense," Ross adds. "'Let's just throw a random thing here because we could,' You have to respect the consistency of the mechanics – anything that goes in the world should do that – and it also has to respect the tone of the character and the story as well. So they can't just be random things."

In other words, you won't be racing your motorcycle through smoke rings in Days Gone, as fun as that experience may have been in other games. "Time trials in the wilderness, in the middle of this apocalypse, when you're grieving for a loss, just doesn't make sense, and it betrays the tone of the whole experience," Ross says. "There's no side quest that lets you go off and find 30 apples to feed his cows or something like that," Garvin adds. There are elements that feel familiar, but they've been tweaked to better fit the game's tone. In one side mission we acquired at an encampment, we chased down some thieves who had stolen bags of seeds. Functionally, it was a race, as we tore down the road and used boosts to catch up to the bikers. There wasn't a countdown on the screen, however, and it only ended after we'd shot the rival bikes enough to shut them down.

Before I head toward the waypoint, I gas up my bike. It's currently sitting at 52-percent health, but I decide to risk it instead of repairing it at the safehouse. I was truly born to be wild.

UNEASY ALLIANCES

I may not have to worry about traveling merchants, but the road is far from abandoned. As the E3 2017 demo showed, marauders are waiting roadside to ambush unsuspecting riders. Getting clotheslined by a neck-high rope is only one of the ways ambushes can go down, too.

"When you're cruising on the roads you have to be really careful, because if you see cars and things up on the top, basically what they're trying to do is push the car down the hill and time it right," Allen says. "If you're not paying attention, the car can hit you and knock you off the bike." One particularly devious ambush involves the use of weaponized air bags. "I don't know if you ever watch these stupid videos on YouTube, where the guys go flying? That's kind of the thing for this," Allen says. These bombs are small, and are covered up. If you don't notice them and are within their range, you're in for a surprise starring role in an air show.

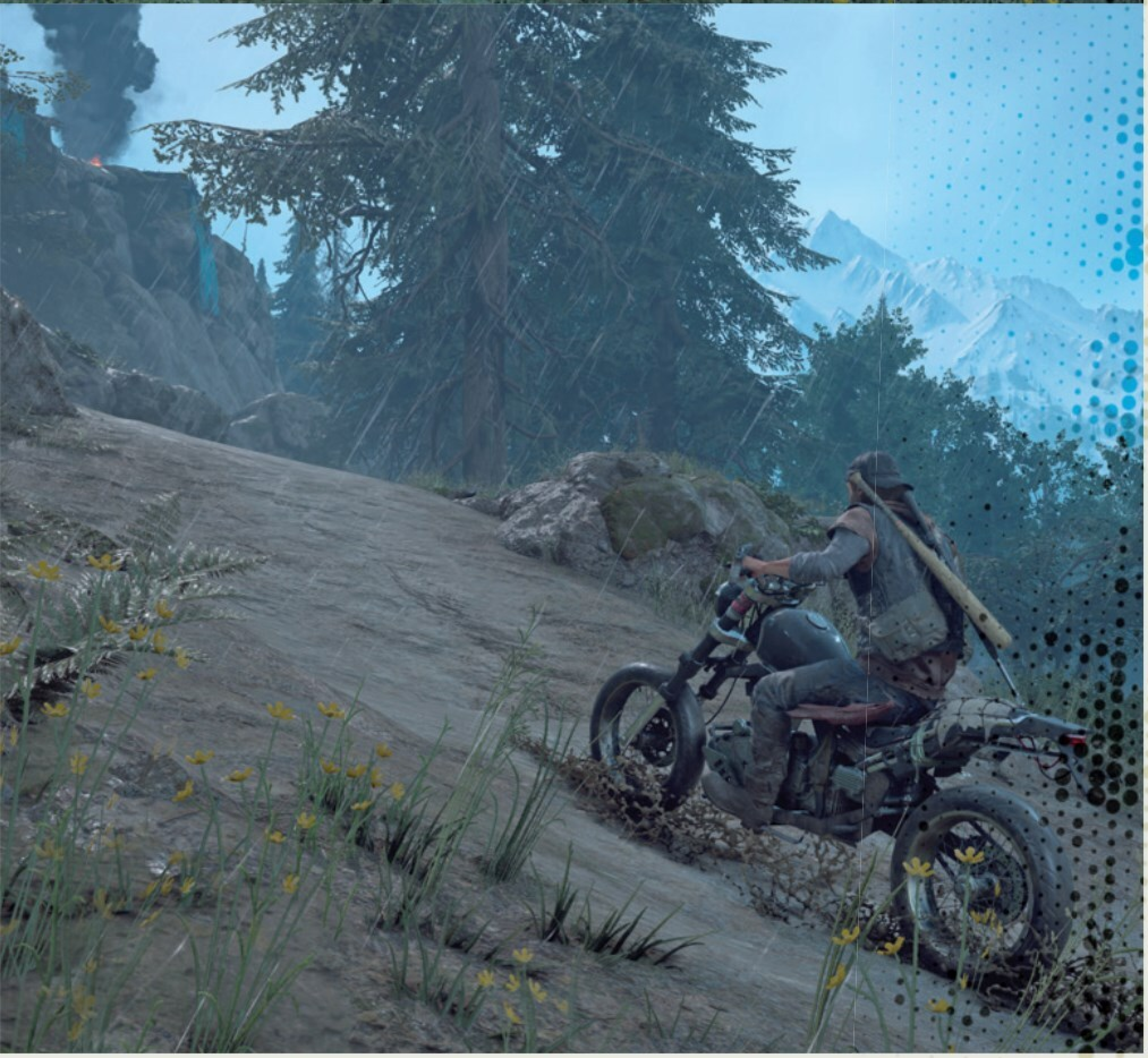
Deacon can (and should) deal with these ambushes as they occur, whether by eliminating the marauders or avoiding them altogether, but the best way to evade them is through prevention. Ambushers have their own bases of operation, acting as the counterpart to the stability that the encampments provide. "The encampments are more established. These are typically the good guys," Jensen says. "These are the guys who want law and order, who want to abide by some kind of ruleset, otherwise it's just chaos. And the ambush camps are the chaos. These are the guys who would kill somebody to get a meal, or would steal stuff from the encampments." As luck would have it, I'm heading toward one such ambush camp now.

Heading toward the radio transmitter, I'm struck by how quiet it is. Deacon's radio is a business-only affair – no songs allowed. That comparative silence makes me more sensitive to the world's ambient sounds, which include hearing the chattering, hissing freakers that are out of sight. The rain has cleared out, and I beeline for the objective.

Copeland's enemies didn't just sabotage the site and call it good, as I quickly learn. I inadvertently ride straight into a group of campers who have dug themselves into the area. In the corner of the screen I see an indicator that shows 0/11 enemies killed. That's an ominous sign, so I get off my bike and head toward the radio tower on foot. My first attempt is a disaster.

I waste several shots on a couple of freakers, and then stumble into a pair of campers drawn to the gunfire. I hide behind a massive tree and pull out my binoculars, hoping to tag the ambushers so they stay visible on my HUD. It works, but doesn't matter; several additional freakers lunge at me from behind, sandwiching me between the campers. Game over.

Running away from trouble is a viable – and often necessary – strategy. Especially when you're facing one of Days Gone's massive hordes



GET YOUR MOTOR RUNNING

Deacon's motorcycle is one of the most important components of Days Gone, and most of the gameplay loops lead back to the bike in some way. It's an efficient way for Deacon to get around, but that's just the start. "It's like an extension of him," says lead designer Ron Allen. "That's why through the game you're not only making yourself more powerful, but you're also upgrading your bike."

Players can improve the bike in a variety of different ways. It's the only one Deacon has, after all, so it's a solid investment. These upgrades can be purchased or acquired as rewards for completing specific missions. You can increase the fuel capacity and efficiency, which means you can go longer distances without having to scrounge around for gas. Frames increase overall durability, and can also provide a bit of aesthetic flair as well. If you're slipping around too much on Oregon's trails, you should invest in a new set of tires, which can give better traction on different surface types and in a variety of weather conditions. All of these upgrades (and more) improve the bike's overall durability, meaning it can withstand more hits before it breaks down.

Considering the state of the roads in the game, motorcycles make a lot of sense. "It'll fit in areas where a car wouldn't," Allen says. "Instead of crashing your car to go in between things, with a bike it's just way easier. That's kind of why the world itself is fixated on motorcycles. They're an extremely valuable commodity."

In addition to the performance upgrades, players can also pour their cash into a variety of cosmetic tweaks, including paint jobs and chromed-out parts. The player's current incarnation of their bike is prominently featured on the Days Gone title screen, so it only makes sense that you'll want to make it pretty.

I respawn at my safehouse, and I repeat the 430-meter ride. It gives me time to think about how to approach it differently. I'm not mad, just disappointed in myself. This time, I'm going to be more cautious. Going in guns-blazing – at least in the early game – is a risky proposition, since you don't have access to a great arsenal. As you purchase new guns and acquire more combat skills, it becomes a more viable option. Still, the loop seems to reward planning and taking enemies out with stealth takedowns, distracting them with rocks, and using quieter options such as crossbows and silenced weapons.

"It's definitely unforgiving. We do stuff in this game that I don't think other games do, where we screw the player over a lot," Jensen says. "But I think it's a welcome change, and I think our tagline of 'the world comes for you,' that's what we try to embed in the open world. You're not safe anywhere. If you stand in one place too long, something's going to come for you. Even when you're on your bike and you're out-running stuff, somebody is going to knock you off your bike and try to take your stuff."

On my second attempt, I walk around the outskirts of the ambush camp to find a better point of entry. Along the way, the words "Horde Discovered" pop up – I don't even want to think about that right now. I edge away from that threat and approach from the other side. One thing's for certain: These ambush campers know how to pick 'em. They're dug in well, with natural rock walls on one side, and a sharp drop on the other. As I get closer, I'm able to see the facility clearly. The radio tower is set near a small building. Perched atop that building is a man with a hunting rifle, acting like a sniper. There's a fence around the perimeter of the area, which makes a straight approach impossible. Knowing how well that last attempt went, that seems like a poor idea, anyway.

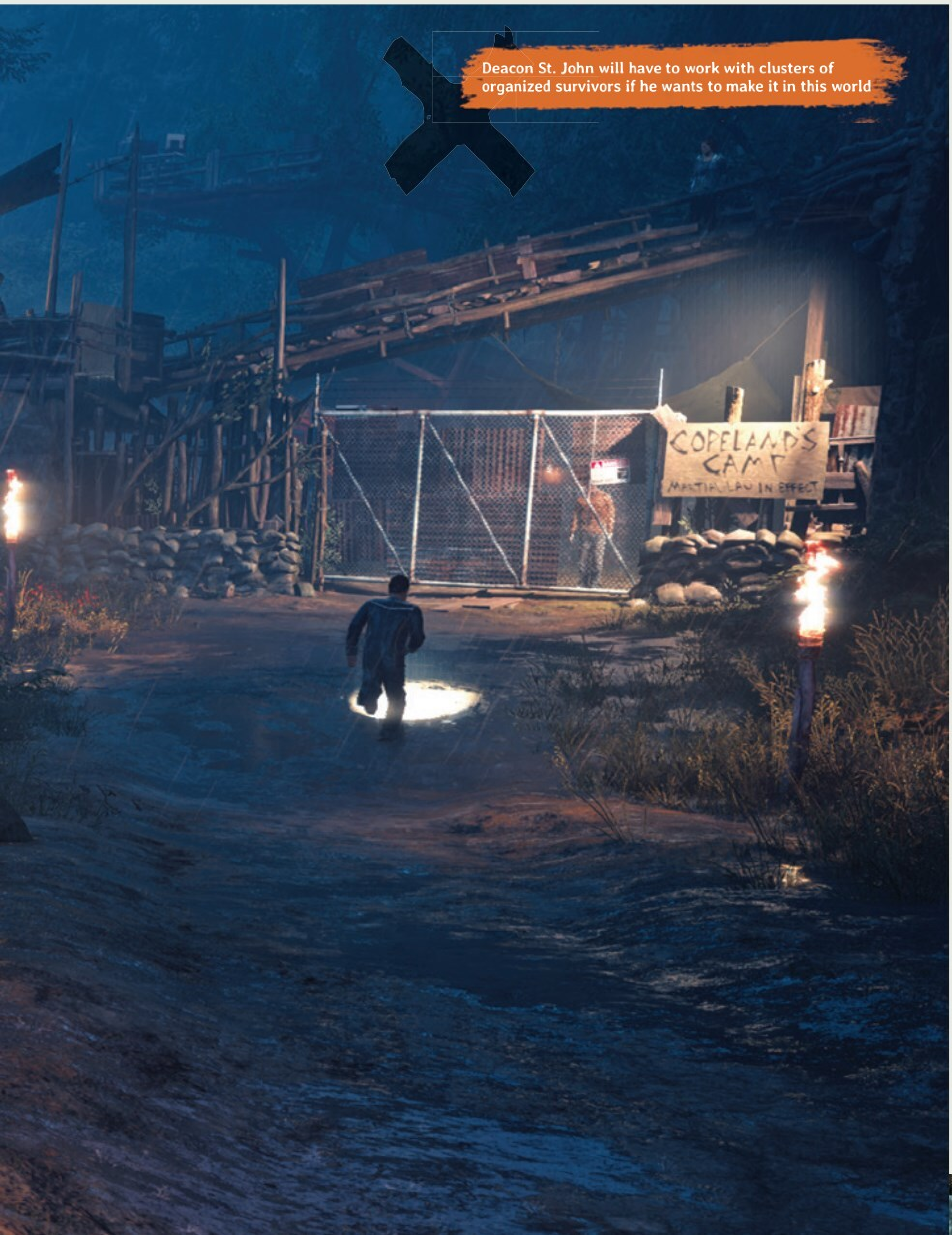
I methodically tag the campers with the binoculars, poking my head around a wall to add three more. I'm surprised by a fourth, who chases me around as I flee. A shotgun blast takes him out, but his friends fan out in response. I'm able to use stick-and-move tactics, though they eventually get wise to my tricks and start tossing pipe bombs at my location. I know how to take a hint, and retreat to the other side of the fence. Enemies do a great job of blending into the world, and I have a hard time spotting the stragglers. For the last few, I use my handgun, which is more effective at a distance than my shotgun. Aiming it can be a little squirrely, but using my focus ability gives me crucial time to dial in headshots, which give me an XP bump for my trouble.

I decide to take out the final guy with a flourish, crafting a Molotov cocktail with a rag, kerosene, and a beer bottle. Sure, that recipe means that's one less rag I can use for a healing item, but I know it's worth it as I hoist the bottle over the fence and watch it vanquish the final baddie with a fiery bang.

I start repairing the broken radio transmitter with some scrap, but am ambushed by a woman in a ratty blue sweater. She says she has nothing and nowhere to go – fortunately "nothing" also refers to the amount of ammo she has in the rifle she points at my head. Deacon lets her go, but I suspect we haven't seen the last of her. Now that Radio Free Oregon is back online, it's time to fully investigate the ambush camp. I find a spiked fencepost weapon, and the crafting recipe to make my own. There's also a map of the region, which clears up a bit more of my own map. And, once again, the area is now open as a fast-travel and spawn point.

I climb the radio tower and see smoke from another campground in the distance. It's a beautiful view of Oregon, and I take a few seconds to reflect on the vantage point. I have more time to reflect on the way back down, which takes a good 25 seconds. "Everybody wants to slide down this ladder, because it's gamey and it's quick and it's fun," Ross says. "But that's not realistic for Deacon. He's not a stuntman, he's not a superhero. He's an everyman who just happens to know a lot about guns and riding his bike. He's not super athletic, and we try to respect that line of realism and relatability." As if to emphasize that point, Deacon huffs and puffs on the way down, even commenting that he really needs to get in better shape.

I walk back to my bike, which is a fair bit of a hike. I'm learning about the game's unusual tension regarding travel. It's a good idea to park far enough away from camps to where they don't hear you, but that also means more distance to cover if you have to retreat in a hurry. You can't whistle to call it back to your current location, after all. Ross says that you can pay a team to retrieve your bike for you if you're at an encampment, but that it's quite expensive and it requires you to hoof it to an encampment in the first place. In short, stay close to your bike.


Deacon St. John will have to work with clusters of organized survivors if he wants to make it in this world

KILL IT WITH FIRE

Riding on, Copeland gets on the radio and thanks Deacon for his services. It's a small gesture, but it helps to establish goodwill between Deacon and that camp. Over time, if players choose to focus on a camp, turning in freaker-ear bounties, delivering venison, and helping with missions, he can help improve the lives of its inhabitants. Garvin says the camps won't get bigger in scale, but that players will start to notice things like shorter lines for food, fewer people in infirmaries, and the sounds of laughter and music. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, Deacon will also gain access to better trade items by forging stronger relationships with the camps, such as higher-quality weapons, bike parts, and other gear.

I follow the smoke to another ambush camp, which is situated near some train tracks. It's a smaller setup, though the squatters have ringed the perimeter with bear traps and cans attached to tripwires. If I hadn't popped into survival vision before approaching, I certainly would have announced my presence one way or another.

I'm starting to feel more confident with the handgun, and the leisurely time it takes for the aiming reticle to get small enough to be useful. My confidence is shaken at one point by an enemy who appears to be trying to reason with me. "Hey drifter, come on out," he says. "Give up. We've got food, water. It don't have to be like this. No sir…" Unfortunately, it does. Once he's gone, I work inward, disabling bear traps by throwing rocks at them, and cutting the wires of the noisemakers. Inside a nearby railcar, which is being used to keep firewood dry, I find enough medical supplies to completely refill my health.

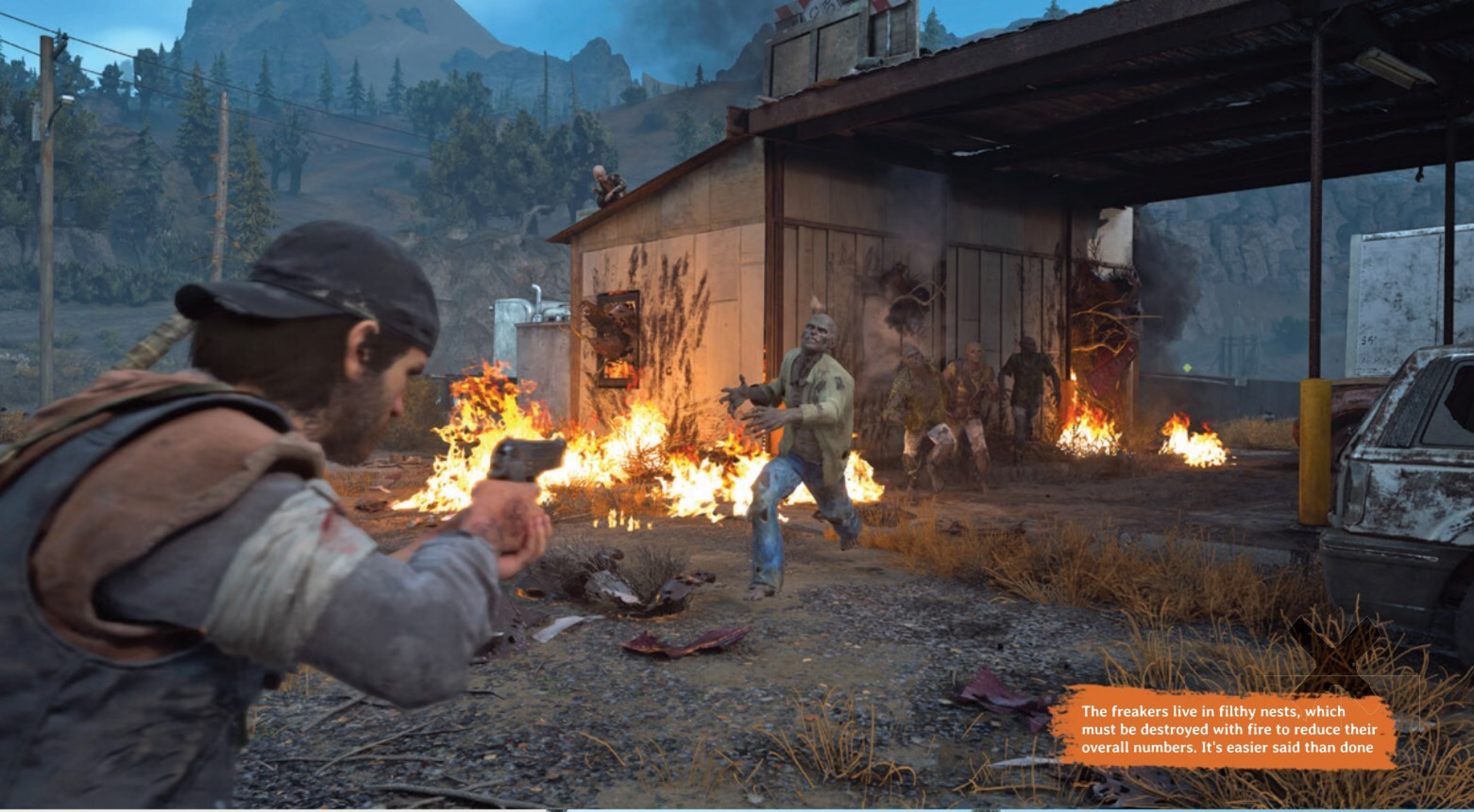
Clearing the camp is easy, provided I take my time. I'm careful to alternate between my survival vision to make sure I don't end up ankle deep in a trap, with the tradeoff being that I can't aim while using that vision mode. Later, I learn that the skill can be upgraded to highlight enemies, which seems invaluable.

The final enemy is fully focused on me, and he doesn't notice a freaker that pounces over an embankment behind him. He shifts his attention, and I dial in a headshot while he's distracted. His final act is taking out the freaker. Thanks, guy!

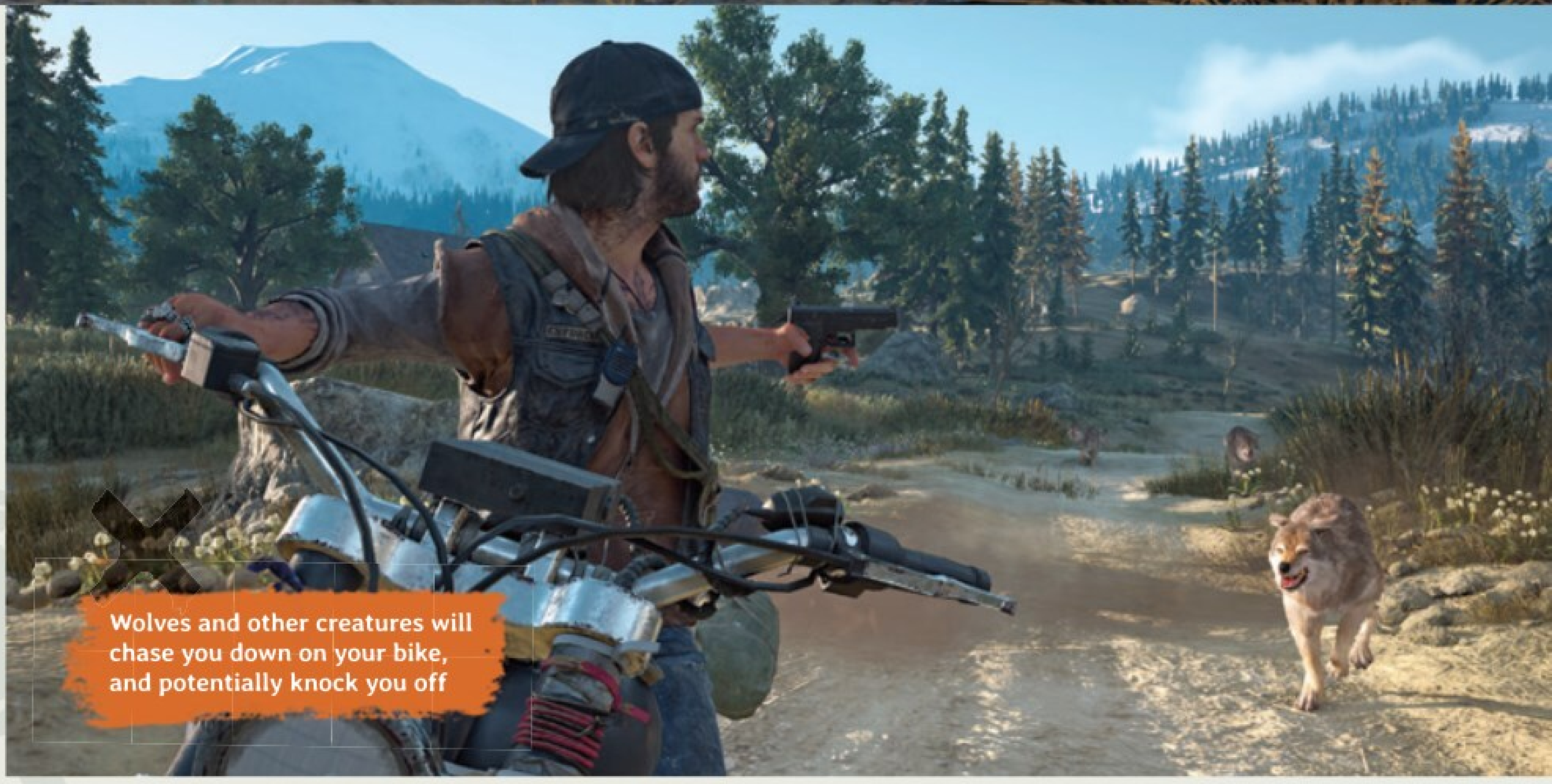
Just on the outskirts of the camp, I get a notification of a nearby infestation. Finally, it's time to hit the freakers where they live.

The freakers don't live in traditional houses, naturally, but that doesn't mean they don't need places to stay. They're drawn to dark spaces, such as tunnels and abandoned buildings, where they create nests out of brush, sticks, and other debris. Judging from Deacon's reaction when he enters one such nest in the High Desert Logging Company, it's a particularly pungent living arrangement. "God damn it, did you all s--- yourselves at once? Jesus Christ," he mutters while gagging.

Here, the objective is simple: find and destroy the six nests. In practice, it's a little trickier. First, I have to locate the nests in the



The freakers live in filthy nests, which must be destroyed with fire to reduce their overall numbers. It's easier said than done



Wolves and other creatures will chase you down on your bike, and potentially knock you off

sprawling complex. And then there's the fact that it's a hotspot for freaker activity. It's daytime, so they aren't particularly active, but dozens of the creeps roam the area. I work my way around the logging site, shooting off limbs with my shotgun, and soaking the ground with geysers of their blood. It doesn't take long for me to be discovered, and I run and hide in a nearby dumpster. One of the infected sees me do it, but she's too stupid to linger for long. She bangs on the lid for a while before moving along to feed on the corpse of a dead freaker. "You might be more delicious, but you're tougher to get to than all those rotting bodies," Ross says.

The only way to get rid of the nests is by burning them using molotovs, gas cans, oil drums – whatever it takes. I find one nest inside a two story storage building, at the top of a flight of stairs. Chucking a Molotov at the top, I wait with my shotgun out to clear out the freakers who were roused by the flames. I'm quickly overwhelmed, and I run back outside.

Taking on the freakers and depriving them of their nasty beds is certainly satisfying, but clearing out infestation zones has another purpose. While the game has fast travel, there's a catch. The areas immediately within the range of an infestation zone appear in red on the map, and Deacon can't fast-travel through those spaces until he takes out the nests. Like Ross said earlier, players have to earn everything they get in Days Gone.

FOR THE HORDE

Days Gone's first E3 demo in 2016 highlighted a particularly striking game element: hordes. The freakers are essentially fast-moving zombies, which makes them dangerous. The only thing possibly more terrifying? Encountering a concentrated cluster of hundreds of the foul creatures. In that demo, Deacon faced such a horde near a sawmill, trying to escape their grasp as they cascaded over and around everything in their path like a rotten river.

Before we left Sony Bend Studio, my colleagues and I took on a horde in a little pass-the-controller session. Was it rough? Yes. Impossible? Not if you're patient and aware of your surroundings. Fun? Absolutely.

Hordes are clusters of infected, and they have their own flock-like behavior. They need to eat, sleep, and drink, and they move in a group accordingly. In our demo, they were congregated around the site of a NERO mass grave, which served as a gruesome feeding ground. The goal of these horde enounters is to destroy a finite number of infected. We started our run on a slight rise above the pit, where they milled around while snacking.

These are typically late-game challenges, and as such, our Deacon was much stronger and better equipped than the version I played earlier. We were armed with a Desert Eagle handgun, a light machine gun, and a semi-automatic shotgun – definite improvements over the starter gear. My favorite upgrade was the napalm Molotov, a supersized (and sticky) flammable gel packed inside a beer growler. Our first few attempts don't go well. Hurling the growlers inside the pit seems like a smart move, but it only angers the ones who manage to survive the initial inferno – which is most of them. The survivors chase us around the muddy trenches, easily overwhelming us, even with the health and stamina buffs that accompany being this far advanced in the story's progression.

Over time, we become more methodical. The napalm blast shifts from being our endgame

to a warm introduction, and we start using the surroundings to our advantage. A red barrel is next to a stack of logs, and when it's destroyed, they careen down the hill crushing anything that gets in their way. Using that, as well as the other barrels that were used to burn the bodies, helps us thin out the numbers significantly. As we eliminate their ranks, a meter that represents the number of remaining infected steadily depletes.

Even with half of them gone, they're still a tremendous threat. I still remember what happened when I was cornered by a handful of them at that first NERO checkpoint. Eventually, we persevere. That gives us time to try a few alternate ideas. One of us drives the motorcycle directly into the swarm, and it goes exactly as well as you might imagine. Another attempt starts by chucking all their frag grenades into the huddle. That works almost too well, and we were told that grenades would be tuned in the final build. Oh well.

The sight of seeing the swarm in action is remarkable. The bodies churn like water rushing in when a dam collapses, flowing around and over obstacles like the trucks that were used to haul the bodies. Just as we were finished congratulating ourselves, Ross brought us back to earth. "This is a baby horde," he said. It "only" had about 300 infected. The one in the E3 demo had 500, and both of those were just the start.

Hordes are scattered throughout the world, and they often congregate (coincidentally enough) around high-end upgrades. Taking out the one we battled, for example, will give Deacon a storage upgrade for his bike, allowing the player to carry more ammunition while on the road.

SOMETHING TO PROVE

As impressive as the infected horde might be – and it's really impressive – what stuck out during our studio visit was how the game's various elements gelled together so well. Open-world games often have a sense that they're Frankensteined together, and that the various parts function in spite of themselves. That doesn't seem to be the case with Days Gone, which, from our time with the game at least, deftly marries gameplay, mission design, and tone. It's especially surprising considering how much of it is new to Bend Studio.

"This is our first real vehicle game," Allen says. "We've been doing shooters forever. Of course, working with a new engine is difficult as well, and trying to deal with all of that. And then you have melee, which is another huge component. It's kind of funny. … Usually, when you work on a new game, you only do one or two things. I don't know what happened to us – 'Let's do it all!' It's been a really fun and crazy experience. A pretty insane development, but we're all pretty proud of what we have." ◈

Be sure to check out www.gameinformer.com/daysgone for exclusive information on Days Gone, including a developer walkthrough of the first hour, a look at the horde in action, and video interviews

Shadow Of The Tomb Raider

Fighting against an apocalypse

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Eidos Montreal

» Release
September 14

Children light fireworks, then quickly run away laughing as the sky brightens. Decorative floral skulls, colorful bouquets, and balloons fill the town square, as a bustle of people joyfully talk amongst themselves about the celebration. This vibrant scene portraying the Day of the Dead is one of the opening moments of Shadow of the Tomb Raider, instilling a tone different from the rest of the series from the outset.

Instead of braving wintry mountains during an avalanche or barely surviving a boat crash, this early scene puts danger to the side and focuses on a jubilant atmosphere. Having Lara interact with the world around her is something Eidos Montreal wants to include more of in this title. "One thing we want to show is, what happens when Lara Croft doesn't spend her days in tombs or on mountaintops? What happens when she goes to where other people are?" says lead writer Jill Murray.

Of course, it's still a Tomb Raider game, and that's quickly established once we see Lara and her longtime friend Jonah – who looks buffer and sports some new tribal tattoos – sitting at a table near the attractions, piecing together clues to their next thrilling adventure.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider is the third and final installment of the rebooted series. Eidos Montreal is taking the torch from Crystal Dynamics, though the latter team still has a hand in the process. Square Enix describes this new chapter as Lara Croft's "defining moment." She is more capable than ever, having mastered her skills and exhibiting newfound confidence, though the crisis ahead will prove difficult. Journeying through Mexico and Peru, you once again face off against the shadowy organization Trinity, with Mayan culture taking center stage.

Following the conclusion of Rise of the Tomb Raider, Lara has more clarity and wants to better understand Trinity's motivations. However, she accidentally sets an apocalypse in motion after tampering with a Mayan artifact. Lara then faces the unimaginable challenge of trying to save the world.

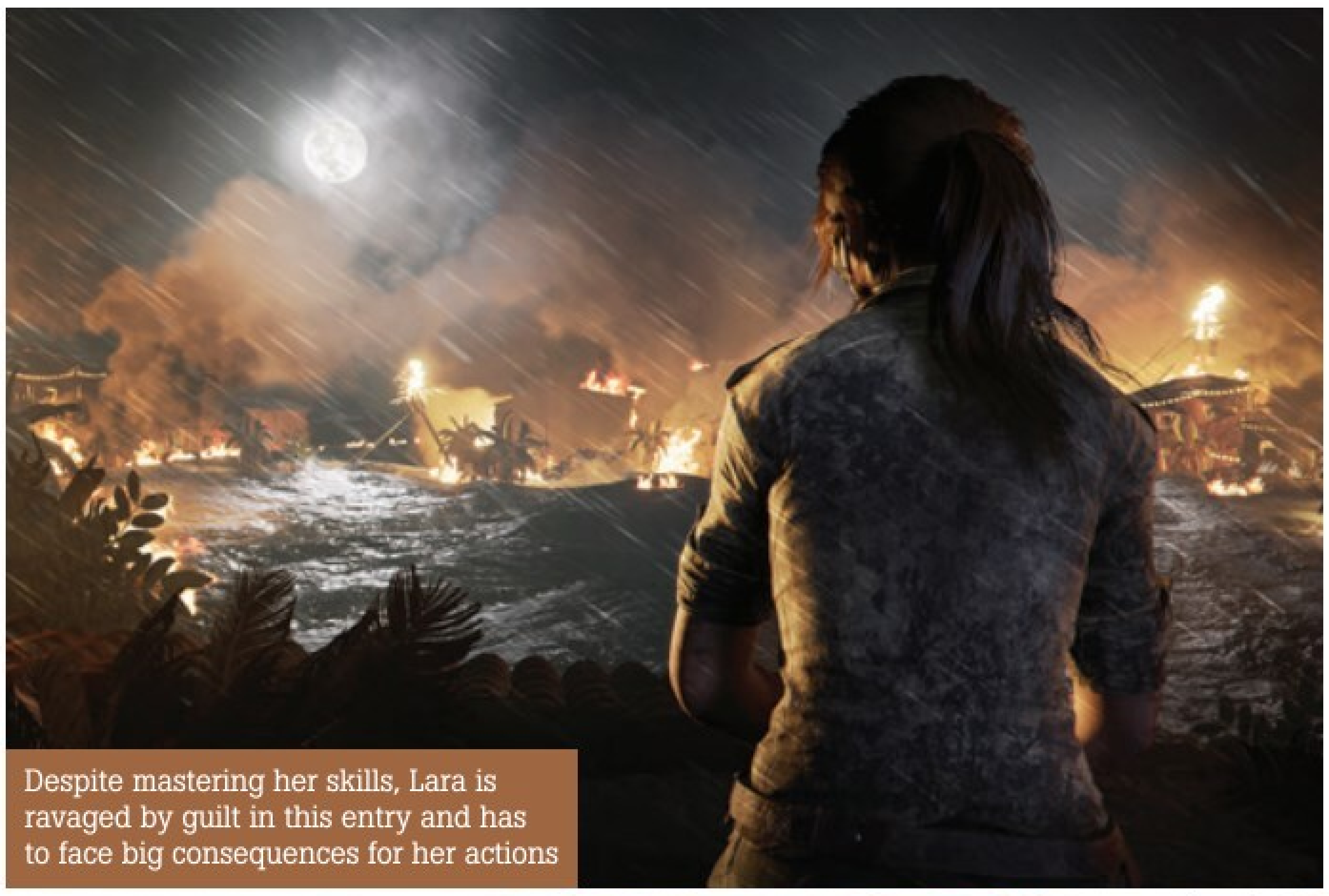
"It's about understanding what it means to be a Tomb Raider, as well as understanding the consequences of your actions," says creative director Daniel Bisson.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider isn't just an evolution of Lara's character, but also an evolution of the trilogy's themes and gameplay. The biggest theme Eidos Montreal wants to convey is "descent," as you explore underground tombs, repel from clifftops with a new rope mechanic, and explore submerged areas filled with secrets. During our trip to Montreal, we went hands-on for the first time. Following the Day of the Dead scene, Lara tails Trinity's Dominguez, the main antagonist, who is organizing a digging excavation around an area you later explore.

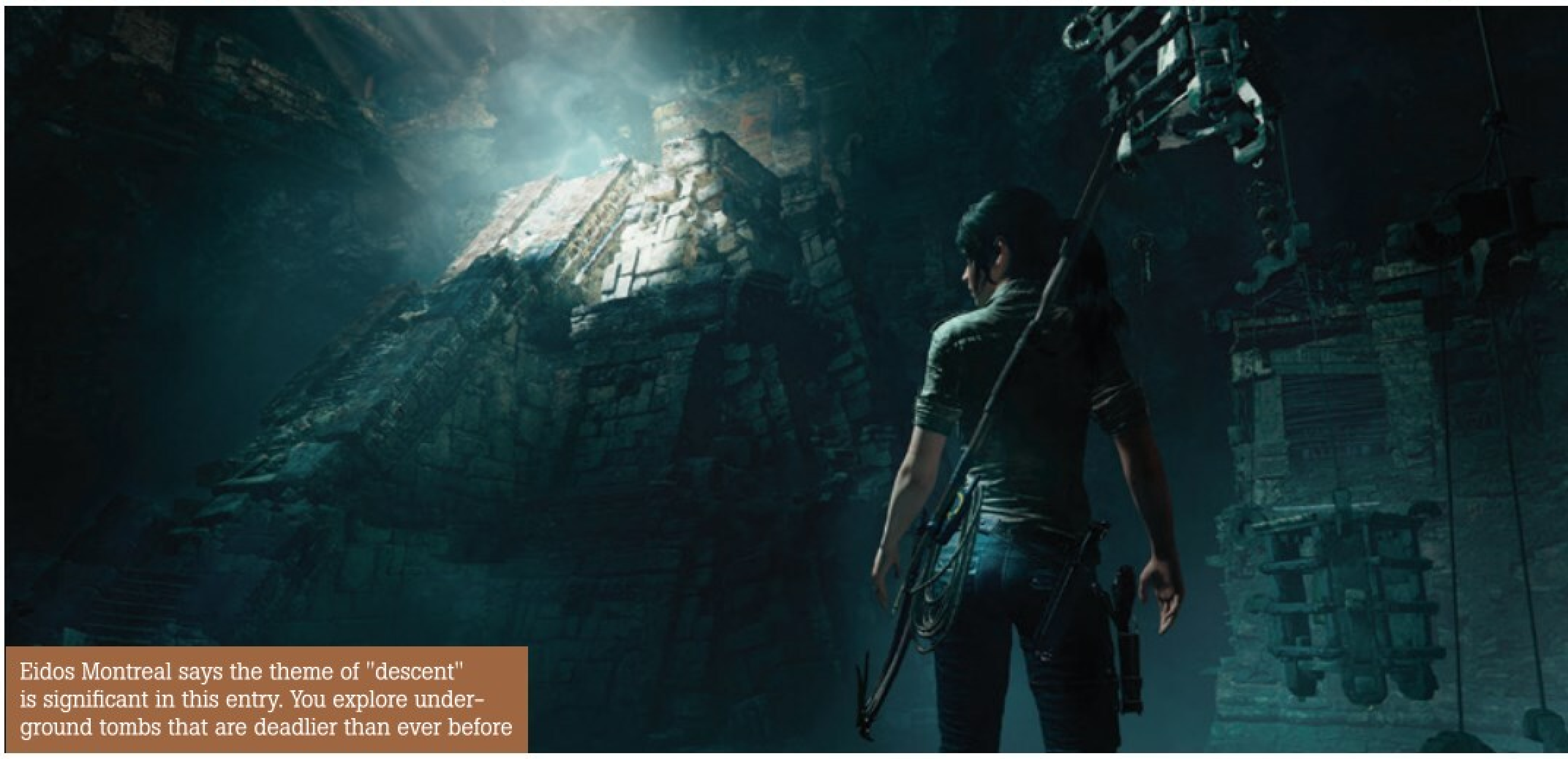
Much of Shadow of the Tomb Raider's gameplay feels similar to Rise, with familiar UI and controls, though it has some key changes. In addition to your trusty climbing axe and slew of weaponry, you can now use Lara's rope. Reminiscent of Uncharted 4, you swing your rope to wall run, gaining momentum as you jump across chasms and cliffs. This brings a welcome smooth and rhythmic feel to climbing.

"She already had a rope, so it's not exactly a reinvention of her toolset, but it is an extension that allows her to have this experience," says level designer Arne Oehme. "And then the wall run – repel swinging, as we call it – comes just naturally from that mechanic to give the horizontal component."

As I gunned down Trinity's men, the gunplay seemed roughly the same.



Despite mastering her skills, Lara is ravaged by guilt in this entry and has to face big consequences for her actions



Eidos Montreal says the theme of "descent" is significant in this entry. You explore underground tombs that are deadlier than ever before

I could craft additional weapons and tools on the fly, and the team confirmed that campfires return for upgrades. The biggest change is the bigger emphasis on stealth. Now, you can return to the shadows after being spotted and foes will swarm to your last known position. This is a welcome change, since it was sometimes cumbersome in previous entries when forced to ditch stealth after you were seen.

"The player now has the freedom to engage with guns blazing and then disengage," Oehme says. "They can change their play style."

With much of Shadow of the Tomb Raider taking place in Peru's verdant and jungle areas, you have plenty of tall grass, bushes, and vegetation to hide in when enemies are on the prowl.

Some tombs you explore may be partially submerged and require swimming around to explore hidden depths. Thanks to air pockets, you can stay underwater for extended periods. The revamped swimming controls allow you to ascend and dive in a much easier, natural fashion than previous installments. During the demo, I swam through an underwater cave, and just before reaching the surface an eel wrapped around my neck like a rope. Lara eventually fought him off, but from both the startling sound effects and the quickness of the attack, I couldn't help but jolt back in my seat. It felt ripped straight out of a horror game.

Ohmes says these tomb exploration sequences are more dangerous than previous entries and appear more often in the main storyline. "Basically, if you approach a puzzle the wrong way, it might turn out to be deadly for you," he says. "Tombs are way less forgiving."

I didn't see the deadliness of tombs during the demo, but tomb puzzles are consistently challenging and intuitive. I enjoyed manipulating platforms by raising and lowering them to make paths and turning mechanisms that moved a section of a floor, so a cart could ram into a previously blocked off area barricaded by rocks.

Deadliness extends to cinematic sequences too. Tomb Raider is known for its big, dramatic setpieces, and we saw some explosive moments in the demo. Near the end, after being told by Dominguez that Lara is the cause of the apocalypse, a tsunami hits. She must quickly jump from balconies to floating cars to half-submerged sign posts. I died a few times, since these sections require you to be swift. As Lara tries to find safety, she notices a young boy she met earlier hanging on from a ledge for dear life. She tries to save him, but she's too late, and he falls to his death.

This moment ravages Lara with unshakable guilt, and this is a central theme of Shadow of the Tomb Raider. How Lara decides to cope with said guilt and what actions she takes in the aftermath of these traumatic situations could make for fascinating character development.

"It comes down to how is she going to deal with mistakes, and which is she going to choose in the end?" Murray says. "Will she choose to be a hero, or a threat?" » **Elise Favis**

GTFO

Gunning for terror in space

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
2 to 4-Player
Online Shooter

» Publisher
10 Chambers Collective

» Developer
10 Chambers Collective

» Release
2018

Games like Left 4 Dead and Dying Light have proven that cooperative horror games can be massively successful, but thus far no one has successfully captured the terror of deep space in a similar manner. After the considerable success of Payday 2, game designer Ulf Andersson left to create a new studio, 10 Chambers Collective, to do just that with its hilariously named first game, GTFO.

"GTFO plays on the *Aliens* fantasy," Andersson says. "That's what I grew up with, and most of the guys on the team, and it hasn't really been done. Alien: Isolation hit the first *Alien* movie really well. I think that was incredibly well executed. But that fantasy of being a squad and you have to weld doors shut...there's so many things in there that are interesting."

During the 2017 Game Awards, the debut GTFO trailer showed a team of four plunging deep into a dark underground complex with the goal of extracting a valuable artifact before being overwhelmed by legions of alien enemies. The team doesn't appear to be there of their own free will, perhaps hinting at an indentured servitude or prison scenario. My immediate impression of the trailer's brief gameplay snippets was "Payday in space," but Andersson assures me these expeditions are much more nuanced than the nonstop barrage of law enforcement in his previous games.

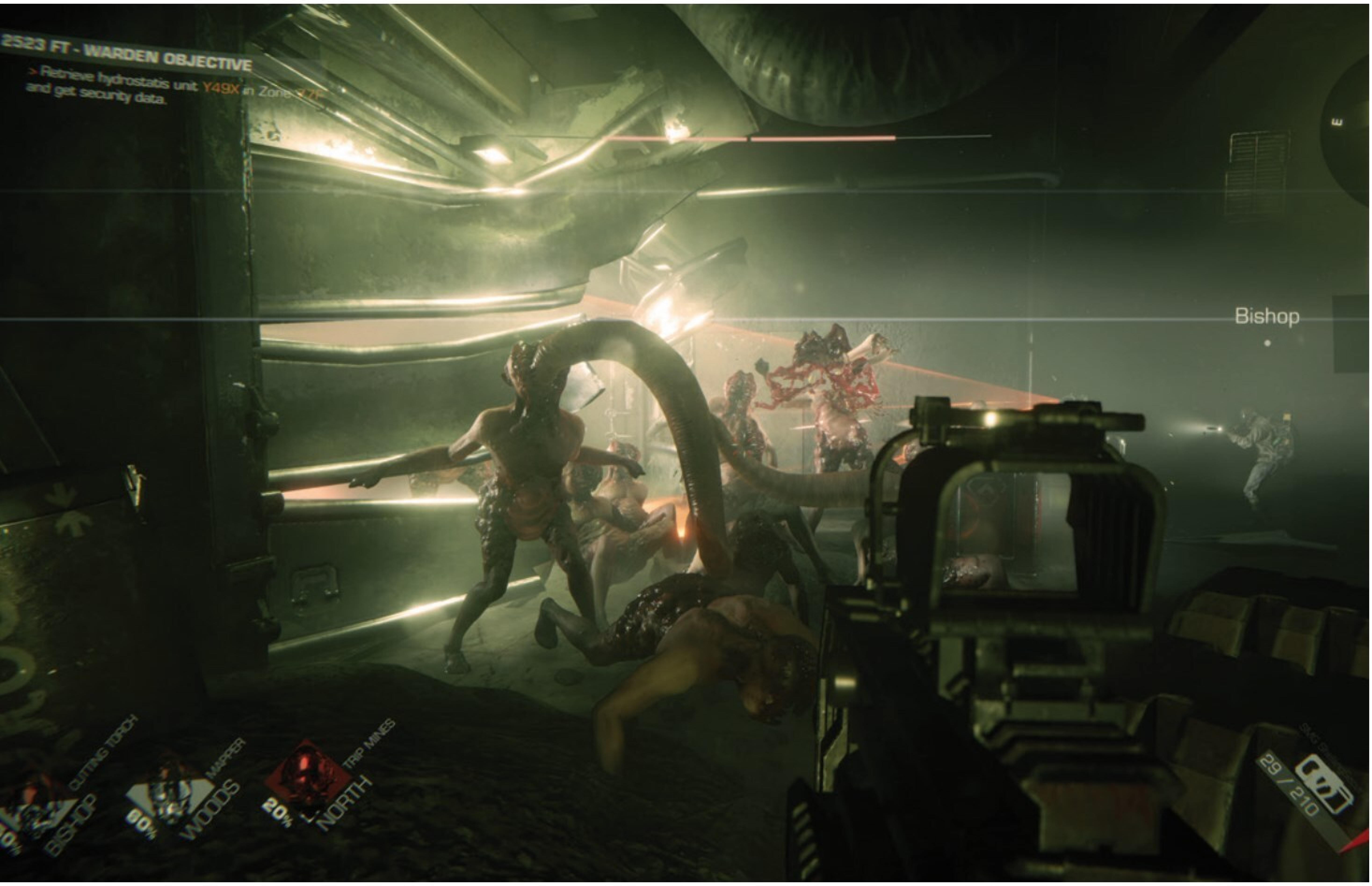
"In Payday, once the alarm was hit, there was just a constant fight," he admits. "You can't eat cake forever. Three hundred cops later…there's some fatigue in there."

GTFO's cooperative missions all follow the basic construct of descending into this massive complex, pursuing your objective, and trying to get out before the A.I. director overwhelms the team. But 10 Chambers plans to create more varied moments in the minute-to-minute action to give these missions more differentiation. Part of that comes down to pre-planning. Players have a wide variety of gadgets at their disposal to bring into the hostile territory, including a cutting torch, mapper, trip mines, sentry guns, and motion detectors. Selecting the right gear for the mission is a critical component, but if things go haywire you still have opportunities to push forward.

We recently saw a brief new demo that showed off GTFO's gameplay rhythm. In this mission, the team descends looking for an encryption key. Before proceeding through a door, one of the players scans the area with a material analyzer - no immediate threats in the vicinity. Moving into the next area, they come across a collection of sleepers, dormant enemies that become hostile if disturbed. A stealth approach works well for the squad until they come across a scout, which spots one of the soldiers and alerts the sleepers. A frantic firefight then plays out with the team coordinating crowd control.

"There's a Plan B if you screw up, you don't need to restart," Andersson says. "If someone f---s up the sneaking, that's not the end of the world. People aren't going to kick you from the server. S--- happens. Plans go sour, and then we try again."

GTFO features several types of objectives that may require varying degrees of shooting, sneaking,



[10cc]ludbig
[10cc]_T_O_P_$

10 Chambers Collective has built a toolset that allows the designers to quickly develop new maps, which should keep the game feeling fresh in the long run

ambushes, and puzzle solving. The more involved missions even call to mind the more complex raids of games like Destiny, where players must problem solve with minimal hand-holding to discover the right way to emerge with the prized artifact.

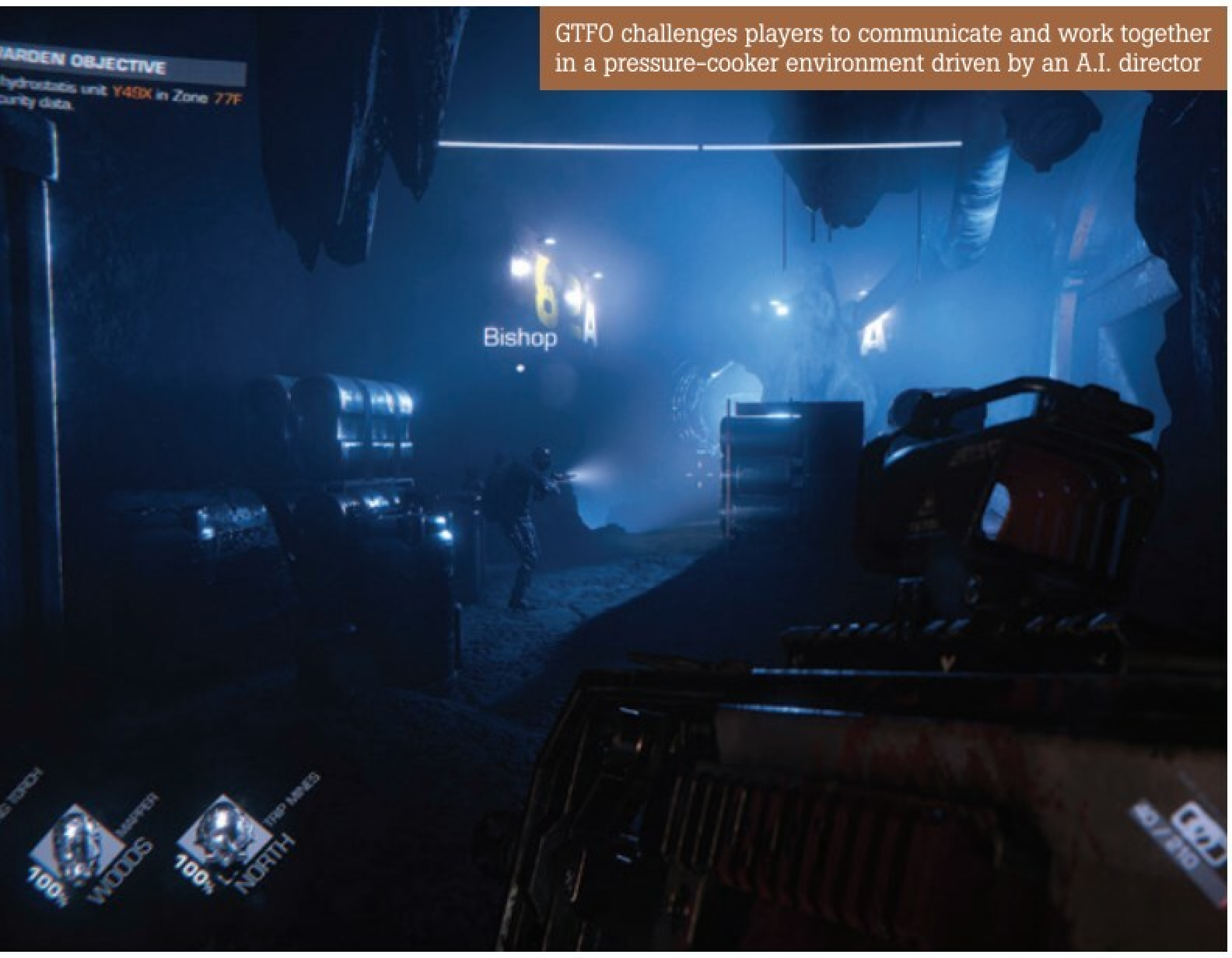
"We're not going to explain everything," Andersson says, "It's sort of up to the community to figure out how to solve stuff, which also makes it more engaging. There's good examples of Destiny where you can get really psyched up on how to solve stuff, and the community will try to figure it out. It's very interesting, and a very fun social aspect of that game. We want to capture that if we can."

10 Chambers is designing GTFO as a service game, and one of the biggest challenges to creating compelling cooperative experiences that still have allure several years down the line is map diversity. Once you learn the nuances of the maps they can start to feel rote. The studio hopes to solve this problem with its robust map creation tools that allow the team to output hand-crafted scenarios at a rapid rate.

Another key for keeping players coming back is a loot system that offers compelling rewards, even if a player has spent hundreds of hours in the game. Andersson's team has analyzed the problems that have arisen in loot-happy games like Destiny, and he believes they have a found a solution that keeps players engaged without showering players with new gear after every single mission. "We'd rather have a carrot like, 'If you do this, which is super hard, you get this specific item,'" Andersson says. "Maybe you can break that apart and build something new with it and have fun with that. But that puts it into attainable amount of content to make. You only focus on stuff that really matters. The plan is to support the game for a longer time and to keep adding stuff instead of trying to come up with 6,000 items and just have people mow through that."

Many modern games artificially prolong the item acquisition loop with lootboxes that deliver random rewards, including duplicate items you can trade for in-game currency. 10 Chambers plans to avoid this controversy altogether by refusing to incorporate microtransactions into the experience. "We intend to just sell the game, and then you get free updates," Andersson says. "But then we'll have to see from an economic standpoint. If we didn't sell enough, but we have a strong fan base, then we might do DLC just to be able to support the game. But preferably if it keeps selling, I'd gladly give s--- away for free."

10 Chambers is keeping elements like the larger narrative and character progression close to the vest for now, but the studio hopes to release a polished early access build of GTFO sometime this year so it can start to get a sense of what the community likes and dislikes. » **Matt Bertz**



GTFO challenges players to communicate and work together in a pressure-cooker environment driven by an A.I. director

Woods
20% NORTH

Dark Souls Remastered

Explore Lordran for a new generation

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
From Software

» Release
May 25
(PS4, Xbox One, PC),
Summer (Switch)

The legacy of Dark Souls, a game released less than a decade ago, is hard to overstate. The game bucked trends by flaunting its difficulty and obscuring its story, two things common wisdom dictated would cause a game to fail in the wider mass market. Rather than failing, Dark Souls flourished, and launched a genre of similar games with their own twists on that formula. Seven years after the original release, Bandai Namco is remastering the game for a new generation to experience Dark Souls, with new changes for long time fans to explore.

Dark Souls' punishing difficulty has always been a large part of its reputation, but only a small part of its execution. Experienced players can settle back into the game as if they had never left, with the enemies and bosses being left relatively untouched from the original game. If you mastered fighting Titanite Demons in Lordran before, you will find them unchanged today.

What has changed are convenience features that bring Dark Souls more in line with modern entries in the series. Items picked up no longer get automatically added to the player's item bar, meaning that simply grabbing a black firebomb does not clutter up the item selection when trying to get to the life-saving estus flask. In the same vein, holding up or down on the D-Pad quick-selects the first item in your bar for particularly harried moments.

Multiplayer expands from four players at once to six to match Dark Souls III's profile. This change requires the Dried Fingers to take advantage of, which were originally placed late in the game at the Painted World but have now moved to earlier on. Players can also seek their friends out for multiplayer using a password system first introduced in Bloodborne.

Depending on the console you play it on, Dark Souls Remastered offers a slightly different experience. Playing the game on PS4, Switch, and Xbox One nets you a lower resolution than the Pro, Xbox One X, and PC. The Switch also halves the framerate, but is the only game in town for players who want to take the experience on the go.

For players new to the game, the new features should make Dark Souls Remastered the definitive edition to play. Similarly, veterans of the game will end up finding enough in its remaster to take another trip through Lordran to unfurl the mystery surrounding Lord Gwyn. Regardless of where you land in terms of Dark Souls experience, you can prepare to die with arguably the best game in the genre with new conveniences and additions. » **Imran Khan**

Below

A dark journey underground gets closer to reality

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Microsoft Studios

» Developer
Capy Games

» Release
2018

First announced at E3 2013, we were instantly intrigued by Below's gorgeous visuals and Zelda-like gameplay. In 2016, developer Capy Games indefinitely delayed the title, vowing to polish the game instead of rushing it toward release. The studio went dark for two years, and only now has Below returned to the spotlight.

Our recent demo begins with my character arriving on a mysterious, rainy island. With a top-down perspective and a pulled-back camera, my character and the environment around them look small and minimalistic, giving the sense that I'm peering into another world from afar. With stellar sound design of rain pattering against the ground, I'm immediately engrossed. An eerie atmosphere takes over as I walk through a field leading up to a cave, with blades of grass waving in the wind and lightning strikes shooting down.

Your character heads to this island to explore the vast underground. These caverns are dark and have limited light sources, so the lantern is a handy tool to brighten your path. However, the lantern can no longer be used if its meter drops to zero. Thankfully, enemies drop shards of light that help refill it. The lantern has other uses, but Capy Games co-founder and creative director Kris Piotrowski says he wants to "leave those up to players to figure out."

Below is a tough game. I quickly come to understand it doesn't hold your hand. Without any instructions or guidance, how much you uncover depends on discovery and wits. Though daunting at first, I eventually enjoyed and embraced this freedom. Piotrowski says developing and playtesting the title has been "quite difficult," though players often accept the challenge.

"As a studio, we have always been comfortable with making games that have a specific flavor, rather than making games for everyone," he says. "So, Below may not be for everyone, just like Cuphead's visuals and extreme difficulty may not be for everyone, though it hasn't stopped Cuphead from finding a sizeable, rabid, and loving audience. For us, that's how some of the most unique and memorable games are made."

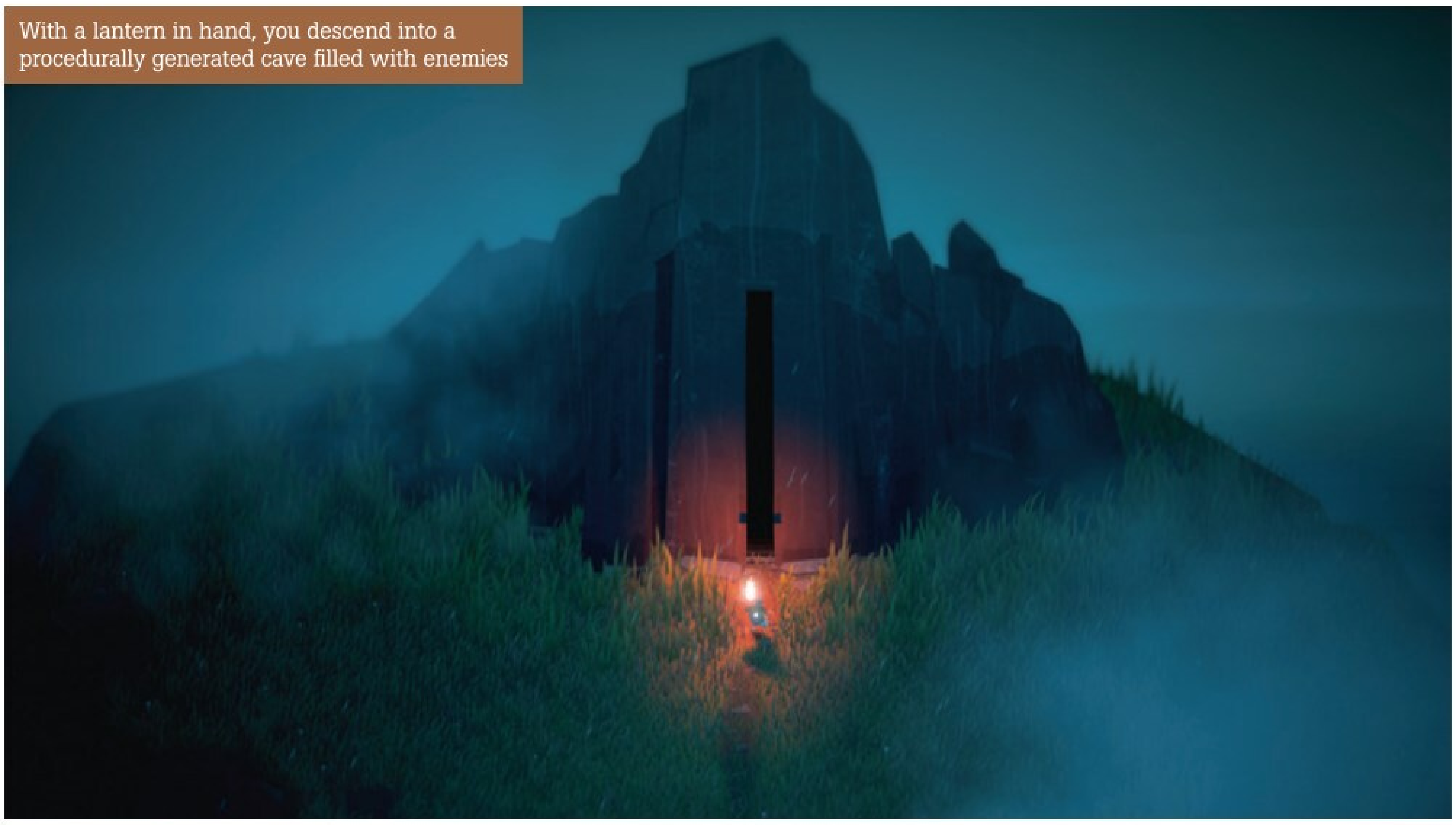
Below's lack of guidance isn't the only thing that makes it difficult. Combat consists of simple mechanics, but skirmishes with enemies can leave you wounded. As I venture underground in a cave, I come into contact with glowing red blobs that use deadly force. After one hit, I start to bleed, and my health steadily decreases. Piotrowski says that playing "very, very slowly and carefully" is the best way to prevent bleeding, and that not all hit damage causes it.

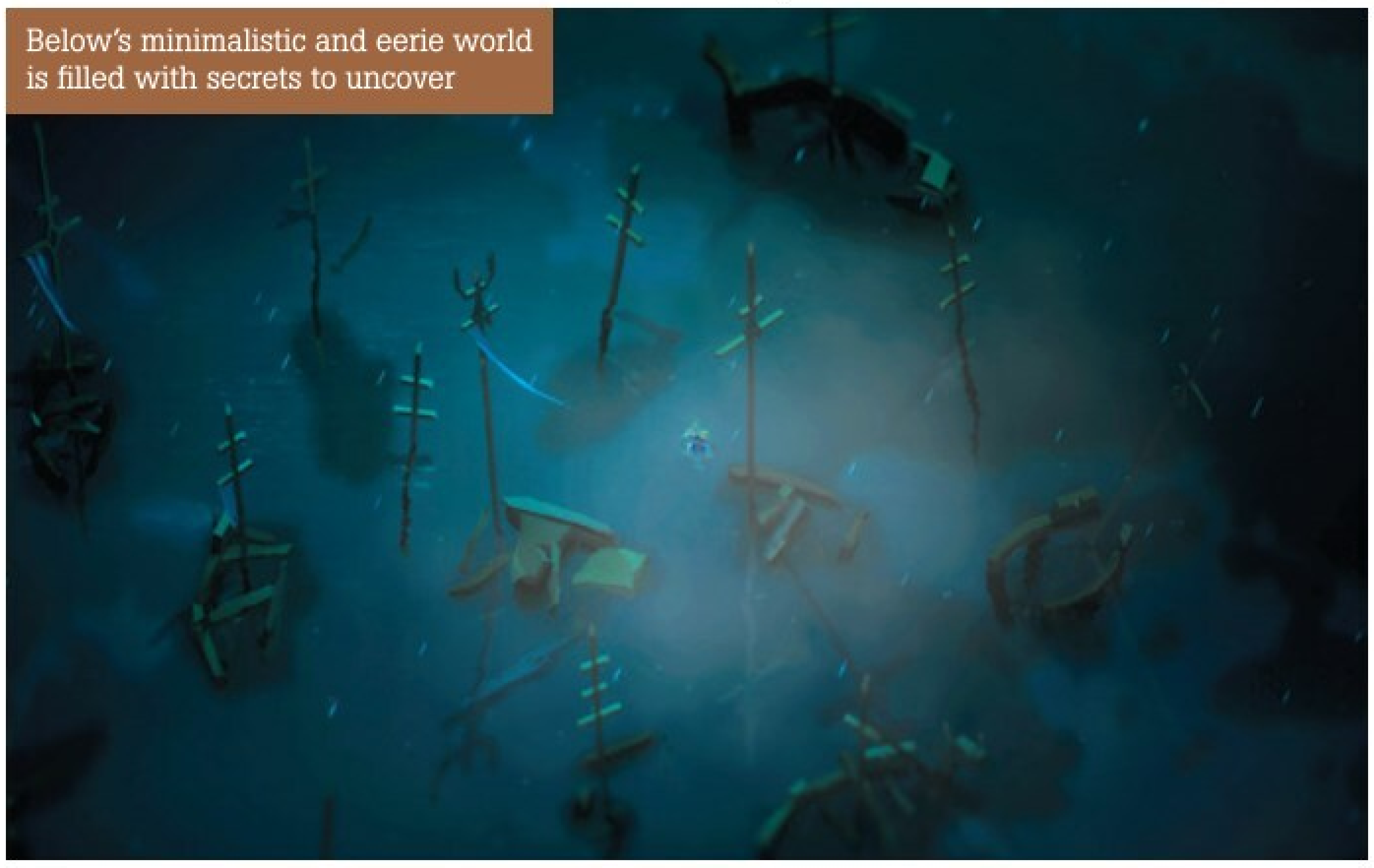
"There are blunt attacks that simply take off HP damage, but do not result in a sustained bleed," he says.

Multiple solutions exist to stop the bleeding, such as cauterizing the wound by heating your sword at a campfire, or crafting a bandage. Soups and other items can heal you, too. Certain gear can also reduce the chance of bleeding.

In Below, your survival depends not just on whether you withstand enemy encounters, but also whether you successfully manage your thirst and hunger. At fire pits, you can cook fish and soup to keep hunger at bay, as well as collect water at riverbeds and puddles. Piotrowski sees crafting as a "support system" for the more significant aspects of the game (exploration and combat). Below includes only a handful of recipes for craftable items that players can memorize as they progress.

Below is a beautiful game with an emphasis on exploration and discovery, and we are keen to see how the final product fares. It is expected to emerge from the depths and release later this year. » **Elise Favis**


With a lantern in hand, you descend into a procedurally generated cave filled with enemies


Below's minimalistic and eerie world is filled with secrets to uncover

Dying Light: Bad Blood

A post-apocalyptic free-for-all

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
6-Player Online Action

» Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Techland

» Release
2018

The success of titles like PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds and Fortnite has driven myriad developers to throw several players into a shared world in a white-knuckled, winner-take-all experience. Techland is the latest team to take inspiration from this idea using the template of its hit 2015 zombie game, Dying Light. However, despite the obvious battle royale influence, it also borrows ideas from The Division's Survival expansion to create a unique experience.

Various elements from Dying Light migrate to this standalone multiplayer title. From the fun and fluid first-person parkour to the emphasis on scrounging for better weapons, fans of the original game should be able to jump right in. Mastery of these elements is essential, as your success hinges on your ability to find or craft a strong weapon once you're dropped into the world.

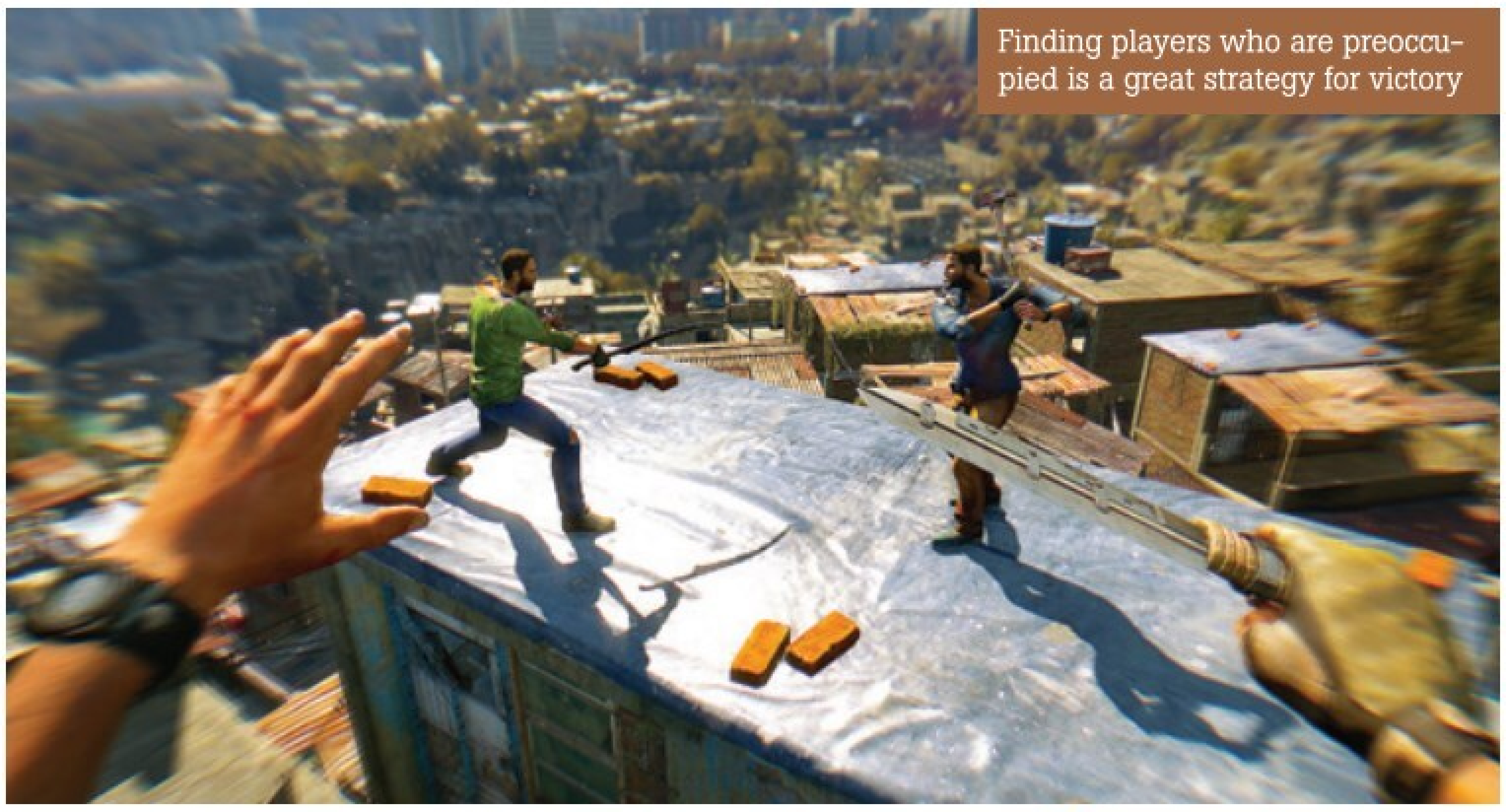
Much like other battle royale titles, victory in Dying Light: Bad Blood is to be the last one standing. Rather than going huge with the player count, Bad Blood features just six players, making for a more focused experience. In addition, rather than just vying to be the last person alive, your goal is to harvest the blood of the many zombies scattered throughout the world to trade for a helicopter ride out of the infected zone. As you collect more blood packets, you level up, increasing your damage and health.

This brings into focus the other deviation from the standard battle-royale format: a player-vs-environment component. Since Bad Blood takes place in the Dying Light universe, you aren't just looking over your shoulder for other players; you're also on the lookout for zombies. The most efficient way to obtain the infected blood is to attack the various nests throughout the city. Each nest has multiple zombies, as well as a mutated zombie miniboss to take down before you can claim the valuable plasma you seek.

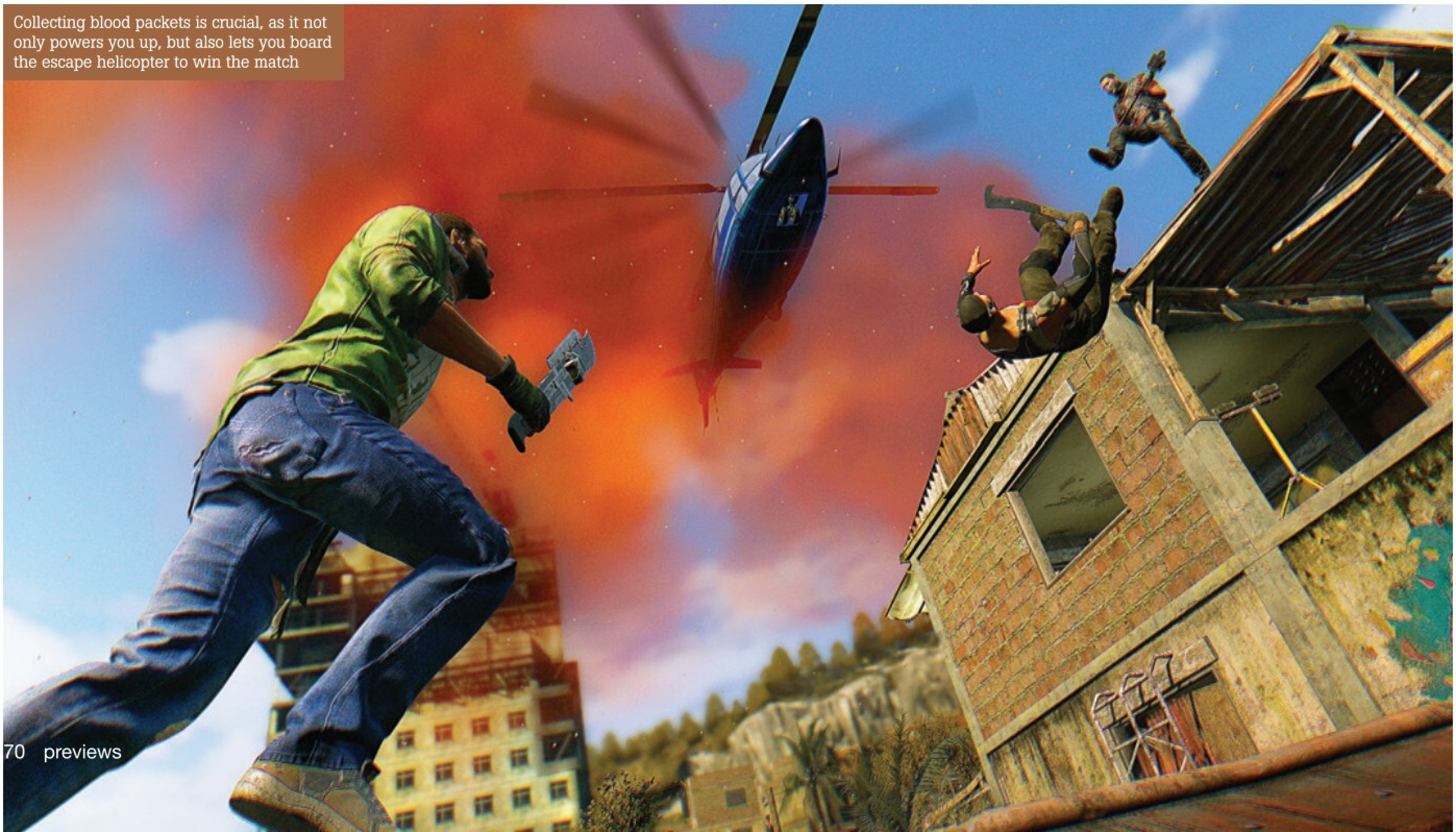
Just like in nearly every piece of media featuring zombies (including Dying Light), the other humans often prove more dangerous than the zombies. In both matches I played, I was killed by another player while I was focusing on taking out a zombie nest. This strategy is encouraged by the design of Bad Blood. If you take down another player, you not only get their weapons, but their blood packets as well.

The match reaches its climax after just 10 or 15 minutes when one player obtains enough blood to call the helicopter. To escape, you must have enough blood and hold the escape point for 30 seconds. This alerts all the remaining survivors of your near-victory state, resulting in a knock-down, drag-out brawl until one player can hold the point uncontested. Thanks to the increased damage and health, higher-level players have the advantage, but with enough skill, anyone can emerge victorious from this intense endgame scrap.

After playing a couple of matches, I was reminded just how much fun Techland's open-world zombie game is. Dying Light provided an exciting take on the zombie genre in 2015, and I'm anticipating the franchise's twist on free-for-all scraps. » **Brian Shea**



Finding players who are preoccupied is a great strategy for victory



Collecting blood packets is crucial, as it not only powers you up, but also lets you board the escape helicopter to win the match

Earthfall

Filling the Left 4 Dead-shaped hole

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Holospark

» Developer
Holospark

» Release
June

Valve's Left 4 Dead series resonated with players and critics alike, but it's been nearly a decade since the last entry in the franchise. Developer Holospark is made up of fans of those games, and hopes to fill the hole the series' absence has left with its new title, Earthfall.

Earthfall presents you with a world where a hostile alien invasion has already taken place and you're fighting back as part of the human resistance. A team of four players must dash through a post-apocalyptic world infested with monstrous creatures. You complete various objectives, loot weapons caches, and watch your teammates' backs as you're ambushed by enemies. I played through two maps and came away impressed at how intense taking on the swarms can be.

The first map has my team navigating a deserted dam. My goal is to restore power to the area and destroy the alien pods that line the way. In addition to the drones that litter the roadways, I encounter Sappers, aliens that pop with a poisonous cloud when you kill them; Whiplashes, lanky creatures that quickly close distance to snatch you; and Beasts, massive tanks that can absorb damage like a sponge.

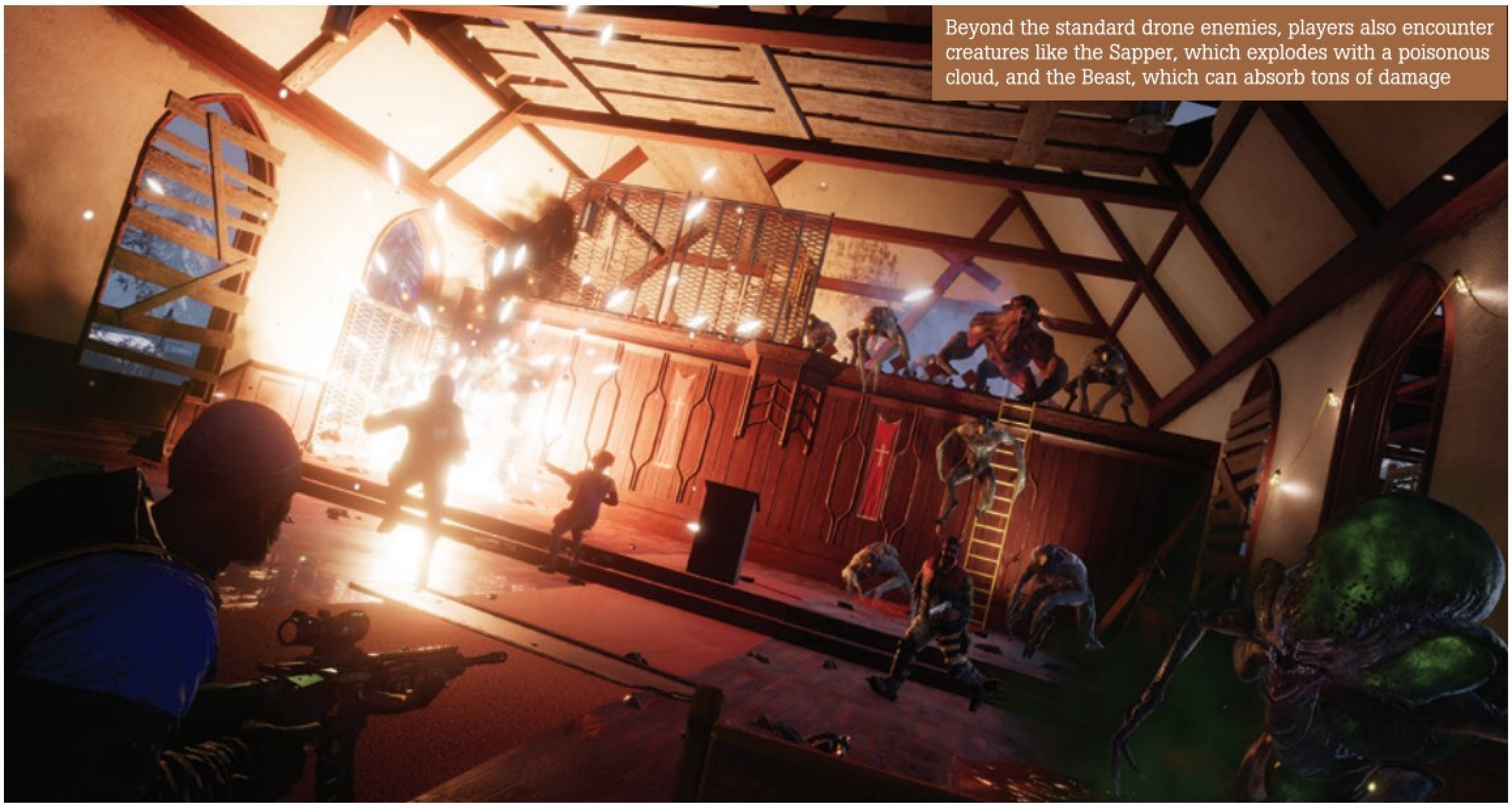
Restoring power to a few buildings starts to attract swarms. It may sound like a risky move, but once the battle calms, we reap the benefits of the stronghold's 3D printer to fabricate weapons and healing station.

After we destroy the pods, things get real sticky. I escape the chaos of the dam to call for evac, but I need to restore power to a barn to get the signal out. I'm immediately surrounded. I easily handle the drones lunging at me, but suddenly a Sapper explodes, taking out two of my teammates. The fight continues to dial up the chaos, and I'm downed as my team succumbs to the swarm in the final portion of the map.

Following my defeat at the dam, I jump to the never-before-seen Hatchery II map. Abandoned mines serve as an eerie and claustrophobic backdrop to the final mission in the second campaign. We need to transport drills to the alien nest, but since this is one of the finales, it's significantly more difficult than the previous map. Each attempt differs in intensity as the weapons and enemies are slightly randomized; one run gives my team a Valkyrie, a powerful rifle that uses alien tech to vaporize enemies, while the next attempt spawns a dangerous Blackout boss alien in close-quarters, which proceeds to annihilate my team.

Taking the fight to the alien stronghold is as intense as it sounds. As the drills dig into the ground surrounding the nest, the swarm converges on our location. Do we split up to expedite the process with multiple drills going at once? Or do we maintain our belief of strength in numbers? Following a fierce fight, all four of us narrowly make it to the extraction point and escape just before the aliens overrun us.

Earthfall has been on Steam early access for just over a year, but the full, multiplatform release is on the horizon. With two campaigns – each featuring five maps – as well as a post-launch support plan that includes new modes and maps, Earthfall is a game Left 4 Dead fans should have on their radar.
» **Brian Shea**



Beyond the standard drone enemies, players also encounter creatures like the Sapper, which explodes with a poisonous cloud, and the Beast, which can absorb tons of damage

Aztez

Fierce combat in a novel setting

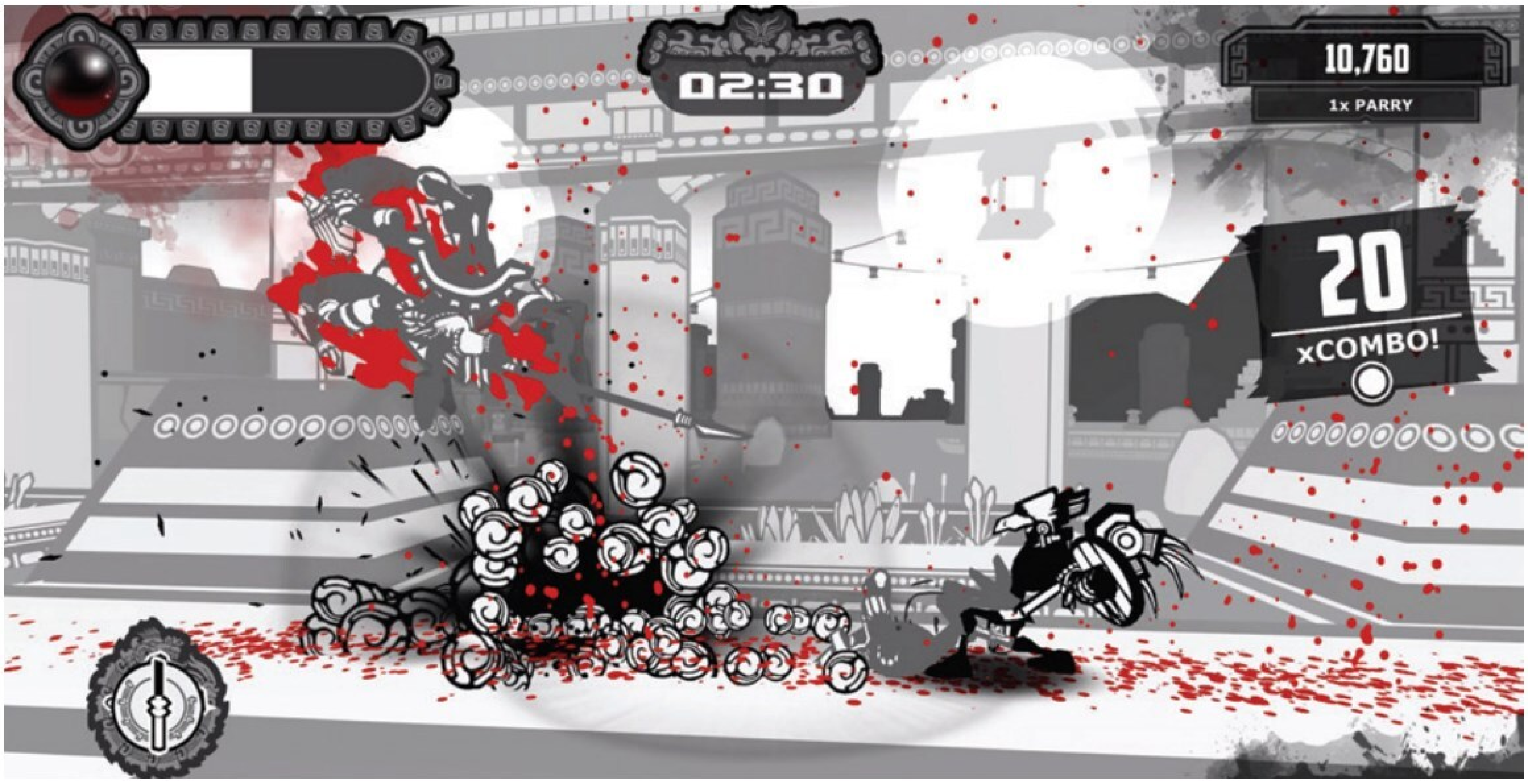
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch

» Style
1-Player
Action/Strategy

» Publisher
Team Colorblind

» Developer
Team Colorblind

» Release
Summer



Aztez originally released last summer on PC, but got lost in the shuffle of other releases. That's a real shame, because this fascinating hybrid of stylish 2D action and turn-based strategy is a ton of fun. Gamers can still go snag a copy on Steam, but Team Colorblind may find a second lease on life for its project when it comes to consoles in a few months.

Players control a burgeoning Aztec Empire as it consolidates its hold over cities, crushes opposition, and sends its warriors into ritualistic combat against its foes. Turn-based rounds unfold on a hex grid, where allied cities and their growing populations contribute resources, which in turn can be used to further expand influence, quell dissent, and purchase new items to aid the empire's growth. Each turn, a variety of combat events pop up across the map, from a fertility festival that might boost population, to the need to wipe out a nascent plague before it becomes a real problem. No matter the issue, the solution lies in brutal combat.

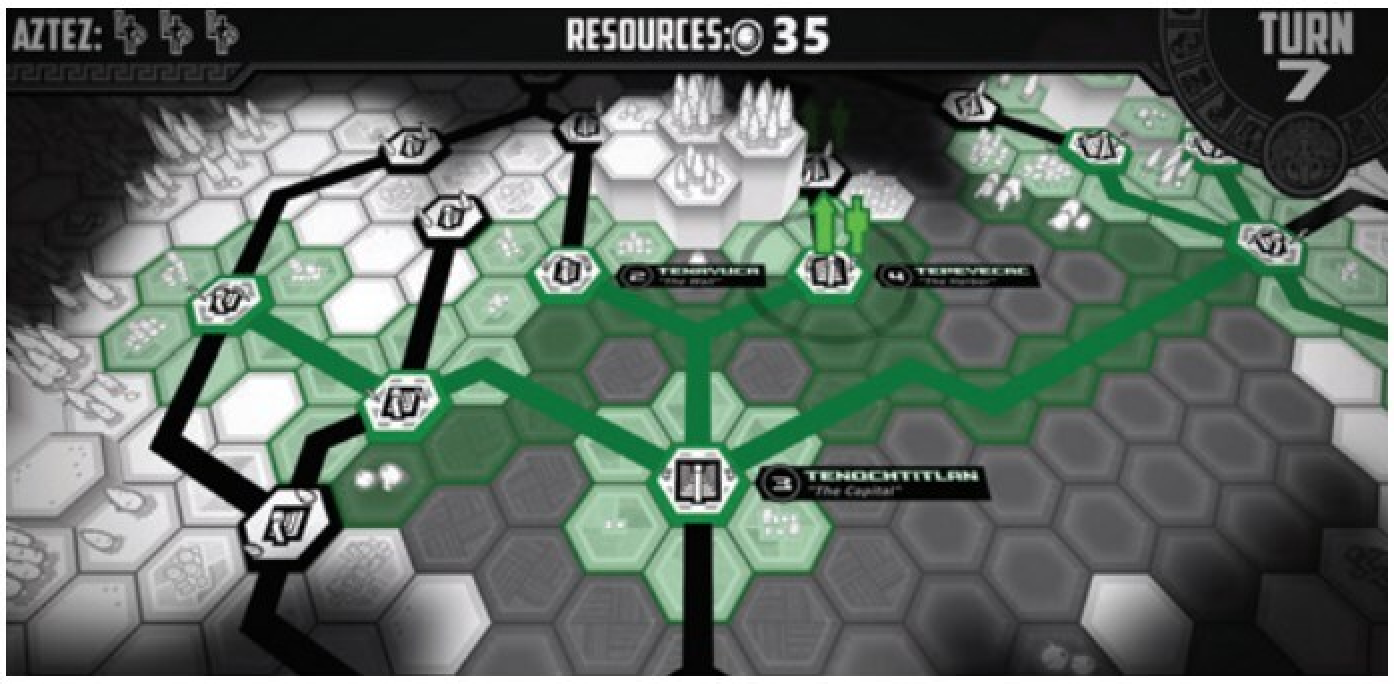
The bulk of gameplay unfolds in these procedurally varied encounters, in which one of your Aztec warriors appears in a 2D battlefield to clash against a variety of canny enemies. The combo-driven combat is tense, fast-paced, and challenging. Each of several weapons handles differently, from the fast diving strikes of the spear to the slow bashing swings of the club. The stark black-and-white visuals are splashed with bright crimson blood colors as weapons hit home, and that blood can be ritualistically absorbed to fuel god-summoning attacks that devastate nearby attackers. Between counters, air juggles, block breakers, dashes, grabs, and vicious sacrifice attacks, the combat loop boasts incredible variety. A robust scoring system encourages improvement, even as you try to learn the different moves that work against deadly priests, shielded warriors, and burrowing fiends from the underworld.

Your growing dominion faces plenty of internal strife during its rise, but late in the game, Cortez and his Spanish invaders introduce a whole new challenge, and it's up to you to change the fate of the Aztec nation from what history recalls. Invader battle encounters bring new twists, like the need to contend against rifle fire. Combat difficulty escalates quickly, and it's all you can do to hold off the invaders from capturing your capital city of Tenochtitlan.

The campaign is meant to be played to completion repeatedly in the style of a roguelite, with mostly cosmetic unlocks carrying over from one playthrough to the next, each time with the goal of increasing your overall score. On each run, the sequence of battles, available items, and potential unlocks changes. If you prefer a pure combat experience without the strategy, Aztez also features an arena mode of increasingly difficult standalone fights.

My first playthroughs of Aztez on PS4 left me excited to play more and further develop my combat skills. Early attempts to nail big combos remind me of games like Devil May Cry, Bayonetta, or The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai. If those hyper-intense action games get your blood pumping, I'd look for a chance to try this one out.
» Matt Miller

GOLD OBELISK
★★★★★
SELECT ITEM



Detroit: Become Human

Navigating through a tense future

Director David Cage and his team at Quantic Dream like to take risks, not all of which have paid off. It's enouraging to see a team constantly push the boundaries of interactive storytelling, but this boldness has also brought controversy and criticism. Even so, Quantic Dream never dials back, and Detroit: Become Human is its most ambitious project to date. This became even clearer to me after playing through its first two hours at a recent press event.

Technological advancement is an intriguing topic right now. What if our future is filled with robots that can ease our burdens and complete tasks incomparably? Set in 2038, Detroit: Become Human imagines a more technologically dependent landscape and what issues would arise from that. Androids have been integrated into society, available for purchase by anyone, and are programmed to obey their owner's every command. Plenty of societal issues are touched upon, such as abuse and segregation (androids must sit in the back of buses and are not allowed to enter certain establishments). Tensions are high, especially since there is an impact on the job market for humans.

The story unfolds from the perspective of three androids who begin to develop emotions and gain the ability to go against their programming. Each is paired with a human character, and these supporting relationships display the struggles of this world. Kara is a fugitive, helping a little girl escape her abusive father. Markus is owned by a kind-hearted, elderly artist who treats him like a son and encourages him to form his own identity. Lastly, Connor is programmed to hunt down disobedient androids, and forced to partner with cop Hank Anderson, who isn't exactly fond of his kind. During my demo, I saw everything from tender moments to uncomfortable scenes of violence.

When in Connor's perspective, you search for clues to piece together what happened at crime scenes, then based on your findings decide your next move. While I played Connor, I attempted to defuse a tense hostage situation and interrogated an android who would self-destruct if I pushed him too hard.

Kara's scenes aren't so much about piecing together complex events, but discovering the best way out of them. A down-and-out father purchases her to play the role of caretaker after his wife leaves him. He's extremely unstable, using drugs and lashing out at his daughter, Alice, for his failures. As Kara, you need to decide just how to get Alice out of this awful situation and keep her safe.

Markus lives in a better atmosphere, working in a lavish mansion with Carl, a well-off artist who genuinely appreciates and cares for him. Markus' challenges come from other people, from strangers who hold animosity toward androids to Carl's drug-abusing son, Leo. As an old man, Carl is trying to prepare Markus for this bleak world without him.

All of these characters have opportunities to forge relationships, make difficult decisions, or die, depending on your plentiful choices. At the end of each chapter comes a flow chart of all the possible variations of the story, and I was impressed with just how many different things can happen depending on what items you pick up, how you problem-solve, and what dialogue choices you make. As I played my demo, I looked at other people's screens around me and saw events play out very differently. This leaves me hopeful for navigating this fascinating and scary world and feeling like the story actually reflected my actions.

While Detroit's introductory two hours were intriguing and gave me more confidence about the game, it's hard to know if it will fall apart or end up being remarkable. Even Cage isn't sure how gamers will take to it. "It's an attempt at trying something different and making a proposition to the industry ... to see if people will think this is interesting, and if games should be about these serious matters," he says. That's the thing with risks – you have to take them, but you can never predict the outcome.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

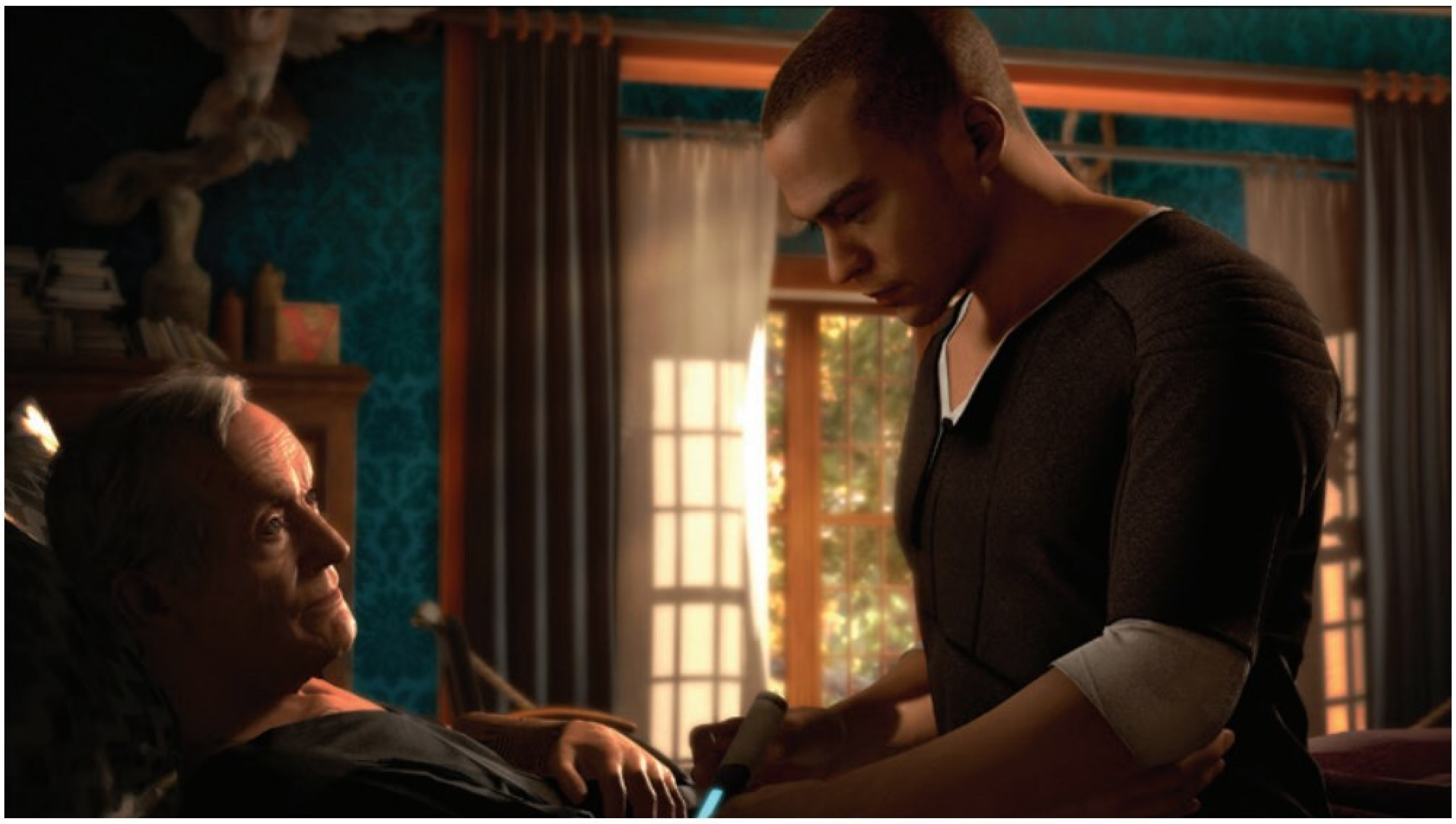
» Platform
PS4

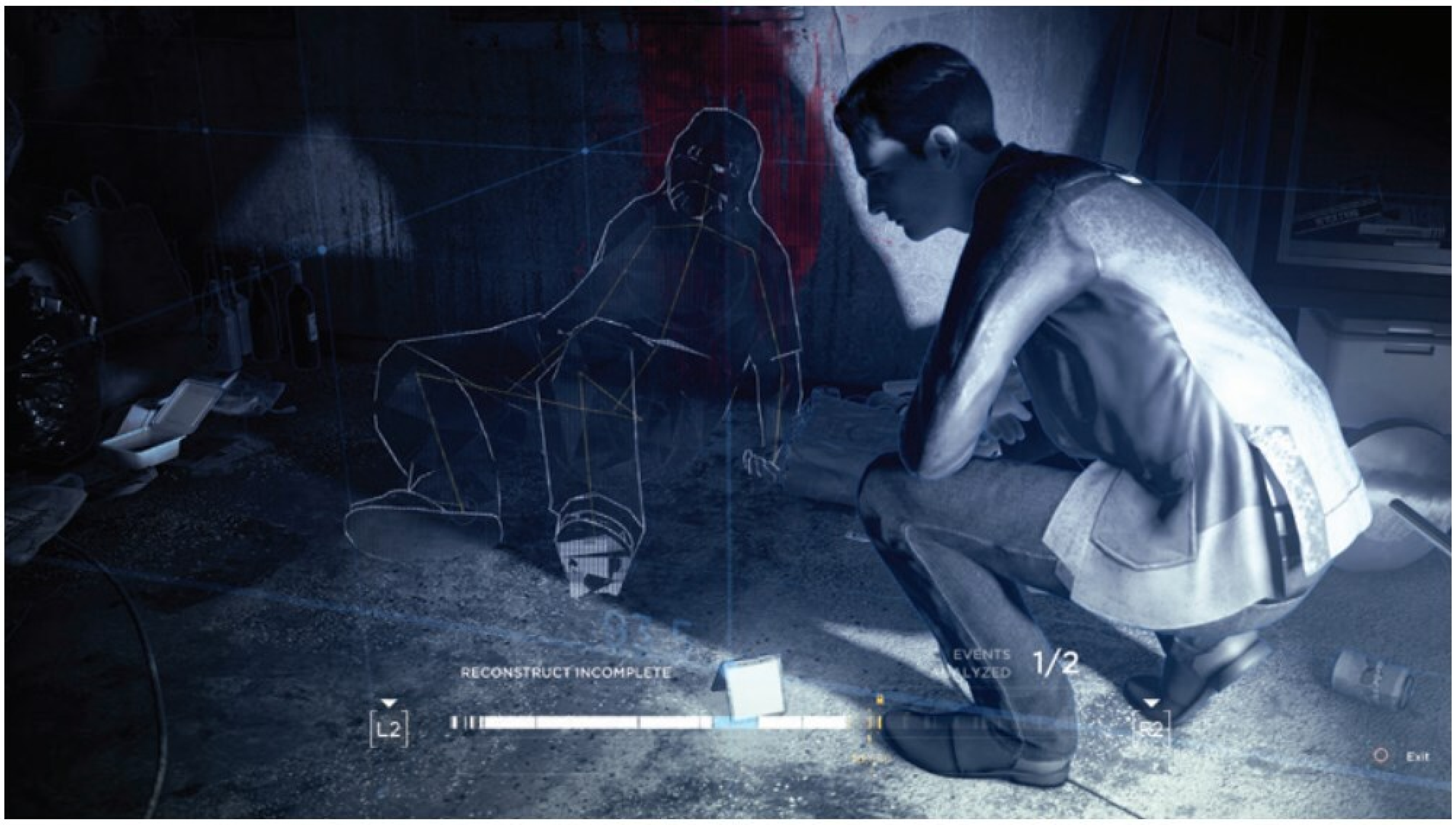
» Style
1-Player Adventure

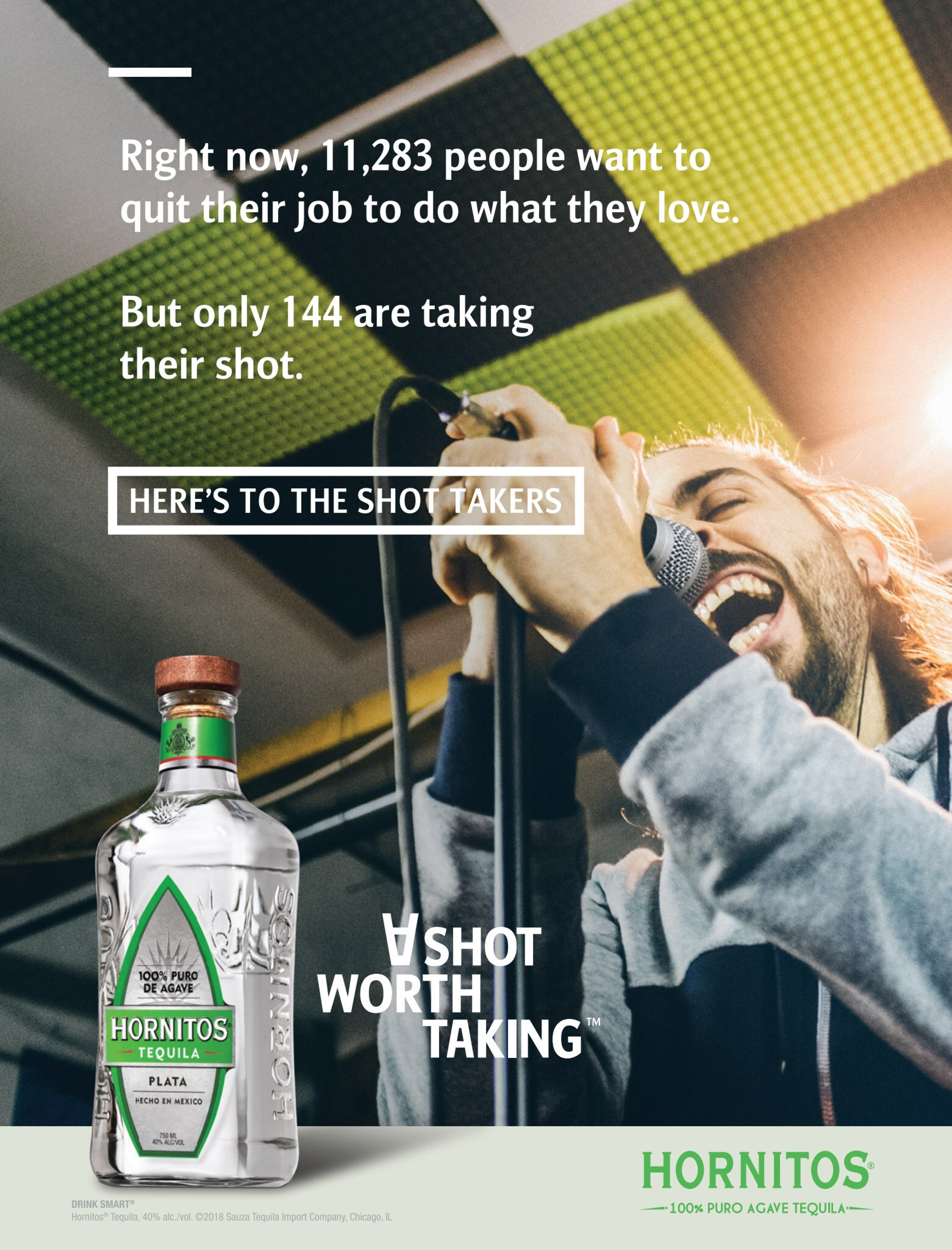
» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Quantic Dream

» Release
May 25







Right now, 11,283 people want to quit their job to do what they love.

But only 144 are taking their shot.

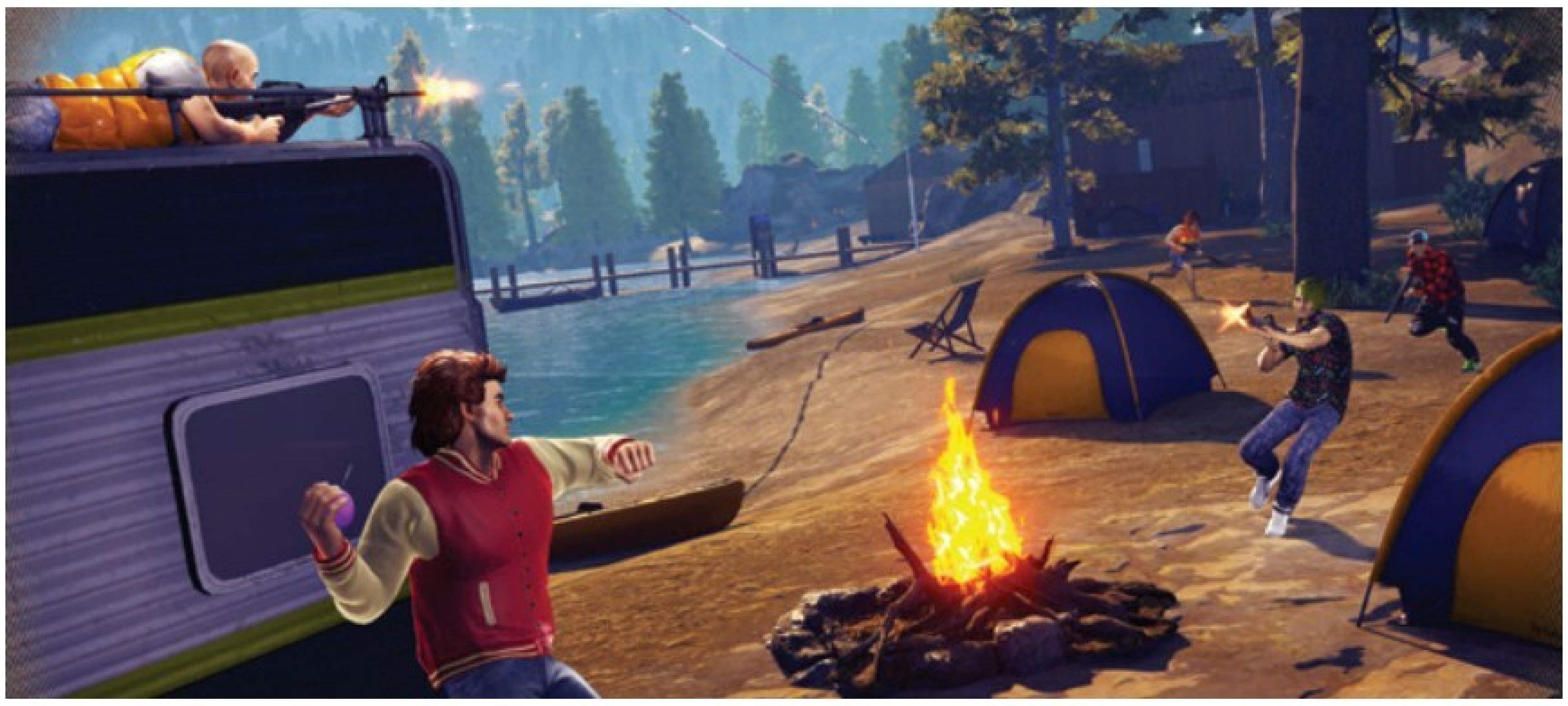
HERE'S TO THE SHOT TAKERS

A SHOT WORTH TAKING™

100% PURO DE AGAVE
HORNITOS®
TEQUILA
PLATA
HECHO EN MEXICO
750 ML
40% ALC/VOL
HORNITOS

HORNITOS®
100% PURO AGAVE TEQUILA

DRINK SMART®
Hornitos® Tequila, 40% alc./vol. ©2018 Sauza Tequila Import Company, Chicago, IL



Radical Heights

Surviving the ’80s

Chances are, you’ve played a battle royale game by now. But have you played one in an ’80s themed game-show environment where you can ride a bike and call down supply drops on an enormous cell phone? Cliff Bleszinski’s Boss Key Productions is rolling out a familiar last-person-standing experience with some new twists in Radical Heights.

The most important thing to note right now is that the game is currently in “Xtreme early access,” which means not everything works right and there are numerous bugs and quirks alongside incredibly barebones textures. You can fall into the terrain, there’s no shooting animation when you’re on a bike, and objects can bug out and spin incessantly. If you download the game despite all that at this beginning stage, you can see some of the elements that might make the experience interesting even in the face of genre juggernauts like Fortnite and PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds.

In-game currency is saved between rounds, so you always feel like you’re making some progress even if you get blown away unceremoniously long before reaching the final circle. You can spend these funds to permanently unlock cosmetics or take a chance by hitting up an ATM during a match to fund the purchase of a powerful weapon or armor – but you’re going to be quite vulnerable during withdrawal.

The field of play is littered with cash and prizes for players to pick up, from simple stacks of dollar bills to vacation packages and TVs. It all converts to money, but the prizes are a nice touch that calls out the ’80s game-show vibe.

In addition to looting and shooting, the world is full of interactive events that make things more interesting. Special prize doors require you to stand on them for a certain amount of time, bike races offer incredible armor for completing them (but watch out for campers at the finish line!), cash storms provide incentive to head to certain areas, and giant spinning wheels offering huge loot and prizes fall from the sky. These dynamic events keep the action playful and intense.

Radical Heights is still extremely rough around the edges and nowhere near anything resembling a complete product, but it is one to watch as we move into a year that is sure to be a battle royale for the battle royale genre. » **Daniel Tack**

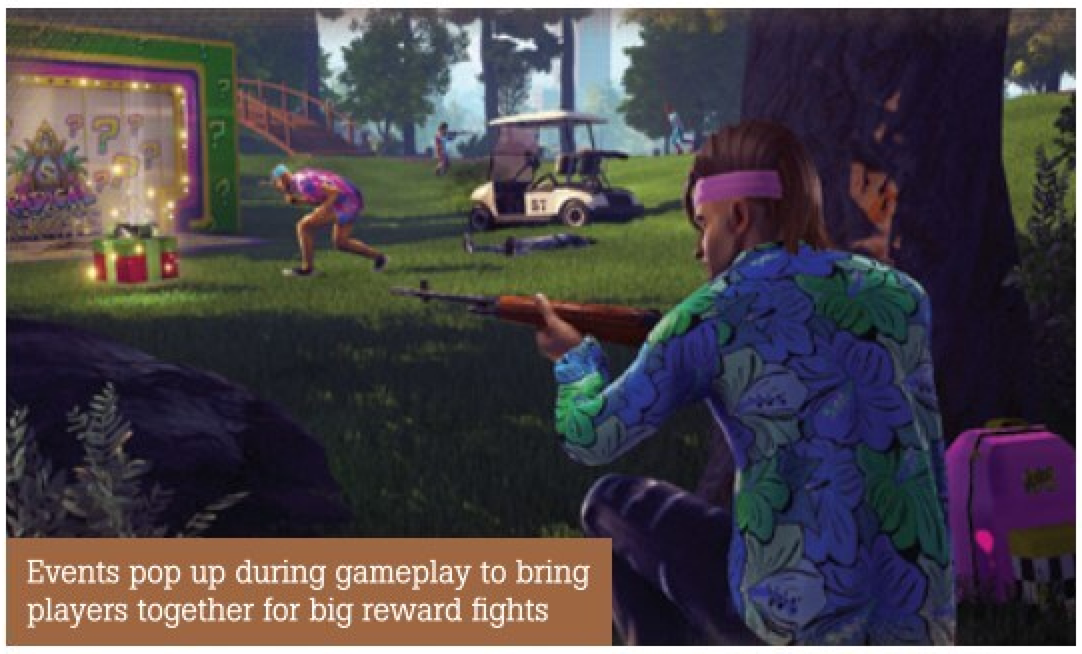
» Platform
PC

» Style
100-Player
Online Shooter

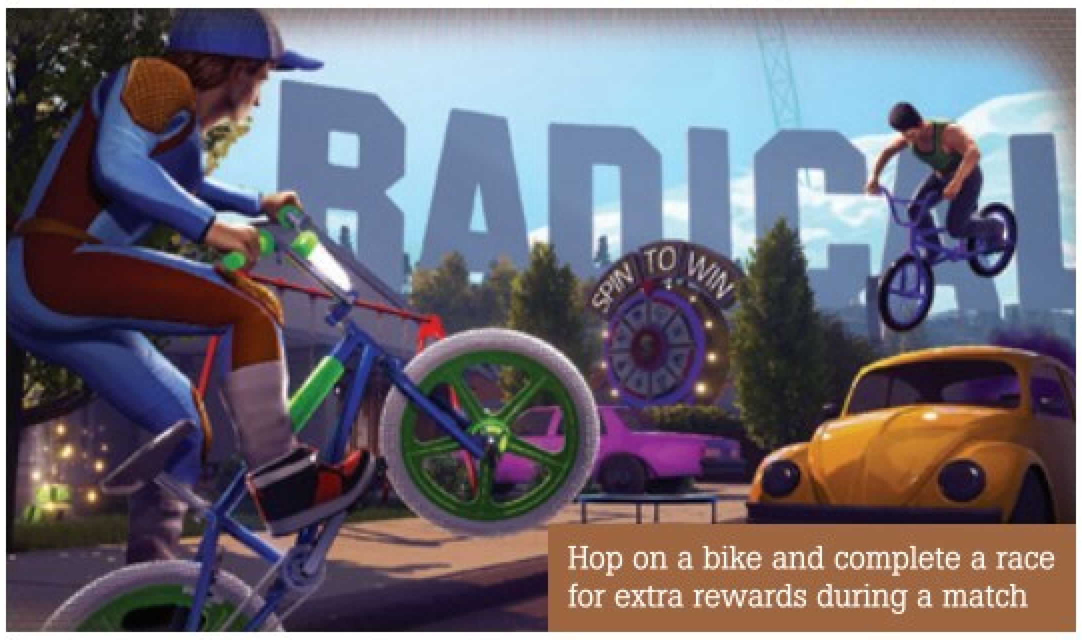
» Publisher
Boss Key
Productions

» Developer
Boss Key
Productions

» Release
TBA (available in
Early Access now)



Events pop up during gameplay to bring players together for big reward fights



Hop on a bike and complete a race for extra rewards during a match

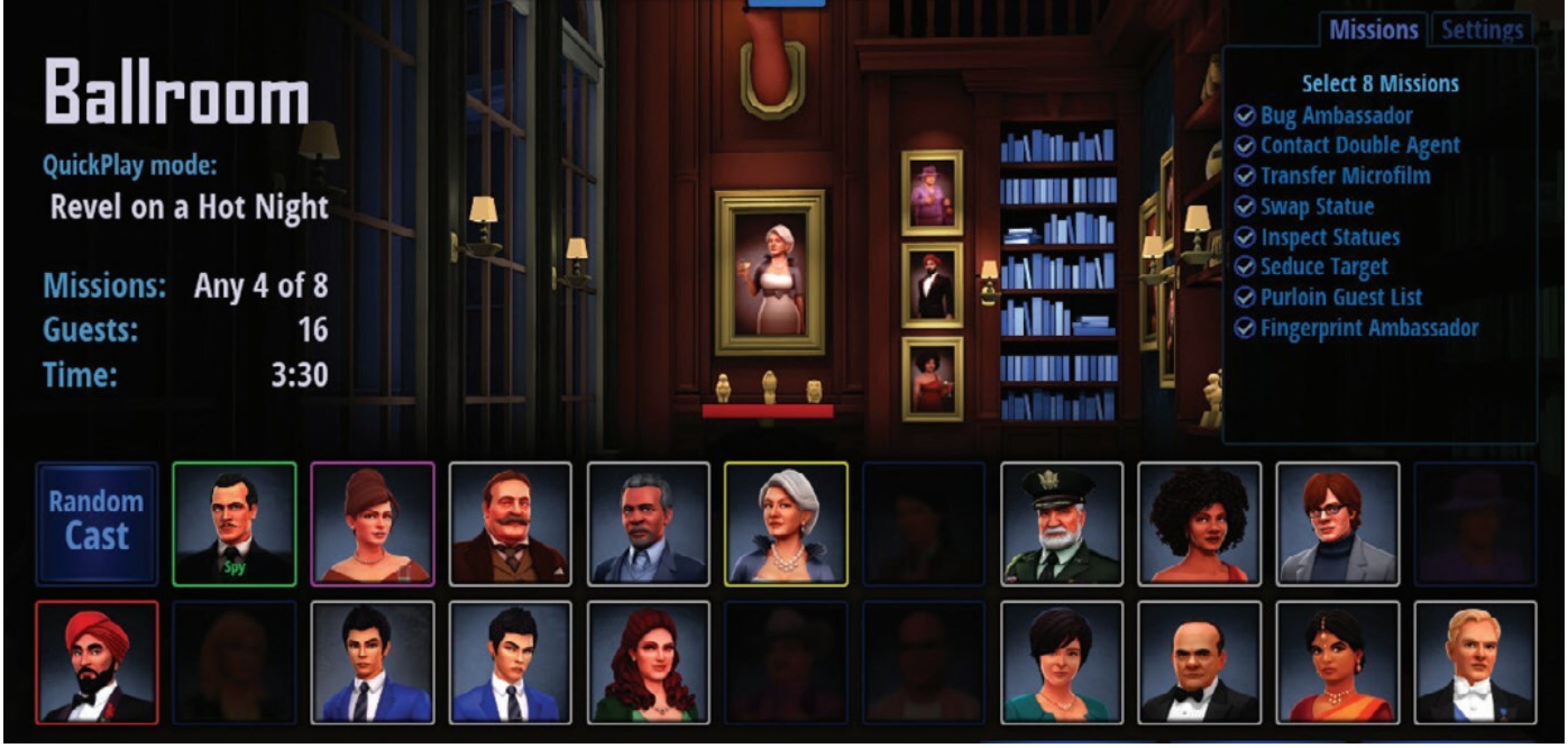
HORNITOS
BLACK BARREL
TEQUILA AÑEJO
HORNITOS
CRISTALINO
TEQUILA AÑEJO

Every family has a black sheep. Or two.

Hornitos® Black Barrel® is aged like a whiskey. Hornitos® Cristalino is triple-distilled and refined for extra smoothness. Both push boundaries with every sip.

A SHOT WORTH TAKING™

DRINK SMART®
Hornitos® Tequila, 40% alc./vol. ©2018
Sauza Tequila Import Company, Chicago, IL



Ballroom

QuickPlay mode:
Revel on a Hot Night

Missions: Any 4 of 8
Guests: 16
Time: 3:30

Select 8 Missions
☑ Bug Ambassador
☑ Contact Double Agent
☑ Transfer Microfilm
☑ Swap Statue
☑ Inspect Statues
☑ Seduce Target
☑ Purloin Guest List
☑ Fingerprint Ambassador

SpyParty

Reading the room to win the day

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Chris Hecker

» Developer
Chris Hecker,
John Cimino

» Release
TBA (available in
Early Access now)

Although games like The Ship and Assassin's Creed Revelations' multiplayer have asked players to act like computer-controlled characters and deceive their opponents before murdering them, SpyParty's tense, elongated showdowns are a new deep end for the concept. Learning the rules of these parties, examining the layout of each fanciful abode, and making the right call at the right moment is stressful and takes time, but the reward for reading your opponent and outsmarting them provides a fun thrill.

In various stages of development since 2009, SpyParty's premise is simple. One player is a spy trying to accomplish various tasks at a crowded cocktail party, like making contact with a double agent or swapping one of the statues on a bookshelf. The other is a sniper perched outside who must figure out which of the many colorful, distinct characters at the party is the spy by judging their behavior, and shoot them. Both players know which of several random missions the spy must perform to win, and each of them acts as one element both must keep in mind as they play.

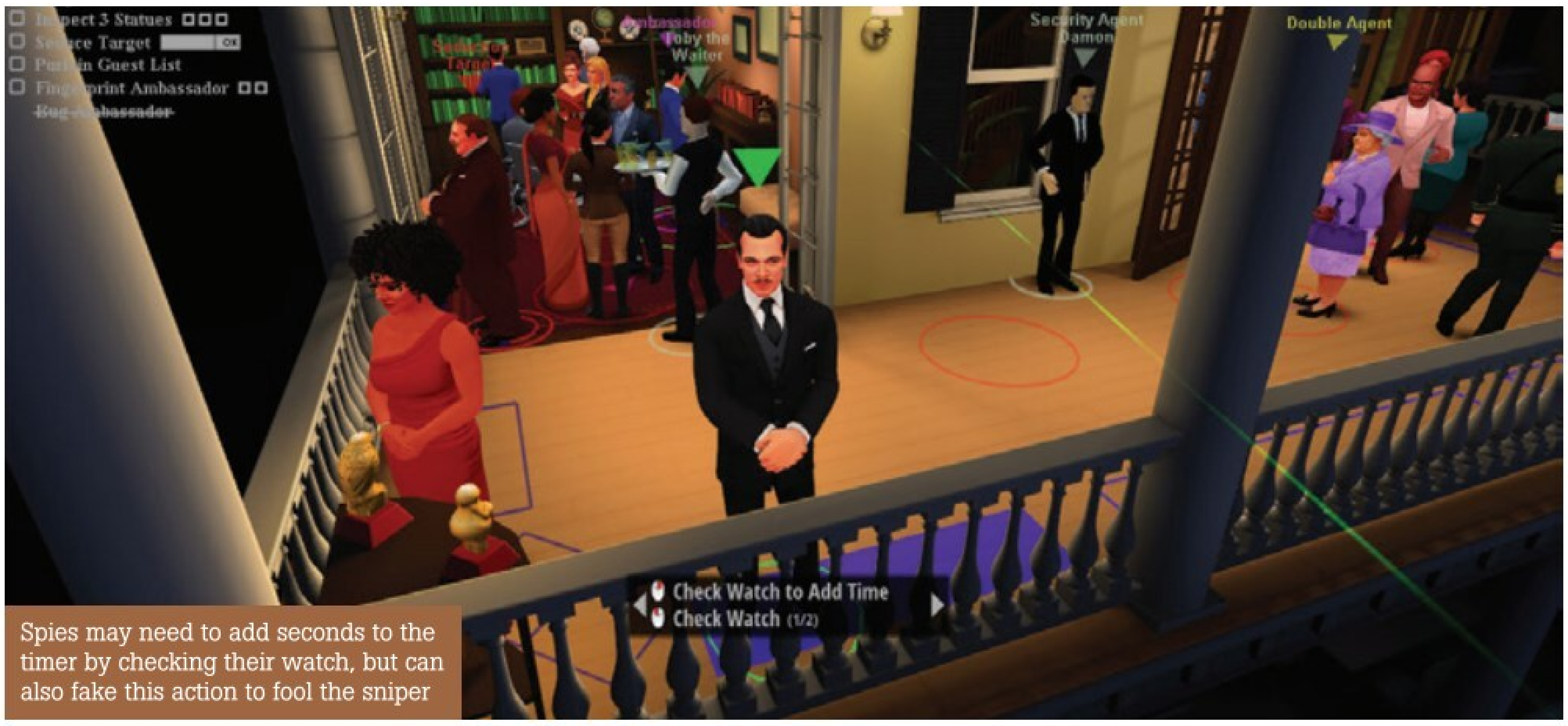
Take contacting the double agent, for example. The spy knows who the double agent is, while the sniper has a few suspects. The spy needs to get close to the double agent to talk to them, and the sniper hears the codeword, "BANANA BREAD," whenever it's said. The sniper should then immediately make note of every character not engaged in conversation and remove them from consideration as the spy. Thankfully, the sniper can highlight and "lowlight" characters to visually represent whether he should continue keeping an eye on them.

With a number of other similar objectives to keep track of, each match proves tense for both players. Spies need to move naturally, which means not stopping once they've started moving until they reach defined parts of the room where computer-controlled characters stop. They can also see the sniper's laser sight, and must keep an eye on it if they want to get away with swapping two statues on a bookshelf unnoticed. Meanwhile, the sniper has to watch each character to make sure they're not acting suspiciously, watch for tells, and keep an eye on the bookshelves, memorizing the shape of each statue for the eventual swap.

In the matches I played, it felt easier being the spy, as I didn't have as much info to keep track of, and once you know how to accomplish each objective, building your own path to completing all of them is fun. Being the sniper, however, is stressful, as you're never quite sure who or what you should have your eye on at any given time. But this made guessing correctly as the sniper all the more rewarding.

While the game is still in early access, with more maps, missions, and (potentially) new modes on the way, SpyParty already shows promise. The single-player portion lets you play against an A.I. opponent, but that should only serve as practice for the real deal. Online lobbies let you test your skills against random players, and is at its best when while playing multiple rounds with the same person (preferably someone you know). It's currently scheduled to leave early access in about two years, but anyone looking for a fun way to outsmart their friends online should give it a look.

» **Suriel Vazquez**



Spies may need to add seconds to the timer by checking their watch, but can also fake this action to fool the sniper

World Of Warcraft: Battle For Azeroth

Sailing to uncharted lands

The next chapter in World of Warcraft focuses on the long-standing conflict between the Horde and Alliance, with sweeping changes to competitive play and new island expeditions that offer something fresh alongside the standard dungeons, raids, and quests.

PvP servers are no longer going to be a thing, but world PvP is coming back in a big way. In any capital city, players can flag themselves for war. Flagged players will then be instanced with other flagged players, meaning PvP is completely consensual. Questing and completing standard activities while flagged confers bonus experience and extra loot, though naturally you end up spending some time sparring with the opposing faction. Other special activities, like loot-rich supply drops falling from the sky in the middle of zones, provide warring players something to fight over.

I explored one of the expansion's major features, island expeditions, in a hands-on session at Blizzard headquarters. I was initially skeptical the three-person, class-agnostic experience would be able to contend with dungeons, but after running a few I'm sold. These randomized slices take around 20-30 minutes to complete and can be run on different difficulties for PvE players, but also can be played competitively as a PvP encounter.

Island play is a race to get 6,000 azerite before the other team of players or advanced A.I. NPCs via cracking open treasure chests, downing rare and elite monsters, and completing objectives like freeing trapped characters or engaging with other island mysteries. The islands are randomized each time, so no encounter is the same – this aspect is the major draw and adds a significant element of replayability.

Instead of grinding through the same old dungeon over and over with the same fights, the islands offer something new each time, thanks to varying creatures and creations on the map and the fact that each enemy team may behave quite differently. The advanced A.I. teams come in a variety of flavors, have many different abilities that traditional player classes don't, and will do what it takes to win. This may involve attacking you outright to take some of your precious azerite, but it may also involve subterfuge or simply maximizing their own azerite acquisition. For example, the pirate team has a roguish character by the name of Sneaky Pete who stealthily roams around attempting to get last hits on enemies you're taking on to steal the kill – and then jumping back into the shadows to do it again.

Battle for Azeroth has a lot to live up to after Legion, which was one of the game's best expansions in ages. We'll find out if the ancient rivalry between orcs and humans can deliver another great addition to the epic MMORPG.

» **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
August 14

Events may trigger things like snowstorms that bring elementals to the battle

Pathfinder: Kingmaker

The slow climb to mastery

» **Platform**
PC • Mac • Linux

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
My.com

» **Developer**
Owlcat Games

» **Release**
TBA

The resurgence of isometric party-based RPGs continues without slowing. Kingmaker draws on the popular Pathfinder tabletop role-playing game, which is itself an evolution of the beloved 3.5 edition of Dungeons & Dragons. Players of either game should feel at home in the familiar rules system, and ready to head off into adventure.

Several months back, I did just that with a very early version of the game. I witnessed some of its later sections, in which the player rules a kingdom and must decide the fate of its citizenry, while also delving out into the wilds to confront monsters and complete quests. This month, I got a more in-depth look at an earlier section – before the burdens of leadership are in place – and found the core exploration, battle, and leveling gameplay to be deeply rooted in the classic isometric games that inspired it, like Baldur's Gate and Icewind Dale.

Within minutes of diving into the open world, I'm struck by the manual and old school nature of play, in which fewer features are automated than we've become used to in many recent role-playing games. While you can automate your party members' actions in combat if desired, the real depth of controlling the pause-and-play battles involves careful decision-making around spell effect ranges, careful allocation of resources like potions and spells, and a consciousness of conditions like blindness or exhaustion that might be affecting your team.

The early ventures out from your trading post base are often necessarily tentative, as dangerous encounters can quickly sap your team's strength. Even resting in the wild feels like a classic tabletop module; you assign tasks like hunting, cooking, and guard duty to different members of the team, and unwary groups can easily fall prey to random wandering monsters.

At first, I admit to being a little turned off by the insistence on micromanagement of everything from character leveling decisions to how many hours I'd traveled without resting. But as the hours passed, I warmed to the control I felt over progression, and the sense of mastery I gained as I slowly built out my knowledge of the surrounding world. I'm also happily surprised by some of the strong personalities I've met so far, from a fighter who fled life as a paladin, to a party member cleric whose god is actively seeking the end of the world.

Kingmaker still has a long way to go before completion, but as my playtime concluded, I was eager to keep going. The video game is based on one of the Pathfinder tabletop games' most celebrated adventure path campaigns. Like that tabletop original, the video game version celebrates freeform story development and flexibility of play. If it can maintain that freedom as the game expands in the later hours, that could be the element that helps it stand out in an increasingly competitive genre.

» **Matt Miller**

Hot Lava

Keep your feet off the floor at all costs

» Platform
PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Platforming (8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Klei Entertainment

» Developer
Klei Entertainment

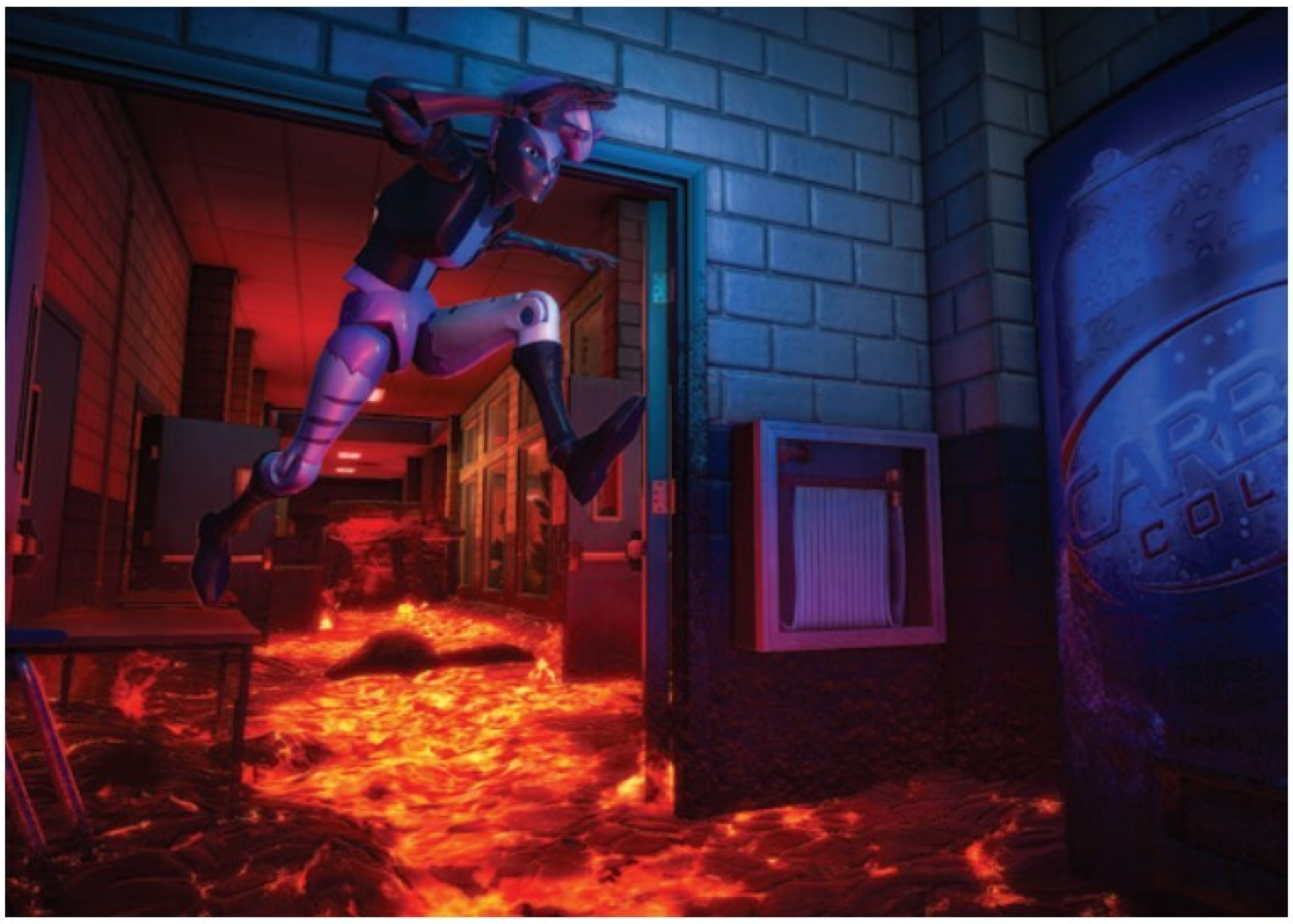
» Release
Summer

You've played Hot Lava before, but up until now it has only been in your imagination. "The floor is lava" is a game nearly every child plays, but Klei Entertainment (Don't Starve, Mark of the Ninja) is applying that strangely universal concept to a video game.

You play a child obsessed with a G.I. Joe-inspired team of heroes called G.A.T.: Global Action Team who are fighting a villain who is trying to cover the world with lava. Klei has made a name for itself with its high-quality 2D animation, and even though Hot Lava is a first-person 3D platformer, it showcases its animation abilities by essentially delivering a full episode of the show to kick off the game. You become action-figure versions of the characters from G.A.T. with the option to unlock new figures and customization options from loot boxes if you perform well.

For each level, you must figure out how to navigate lava-filled locations that feel all too familiar. The opening sequence takes place in your home and tasks you with making your way upstairs to your bedroom while keeping your feet off the floor. Soon after that, you must make your way through the halls of a school, leaping between desks to avoid the molten ground.

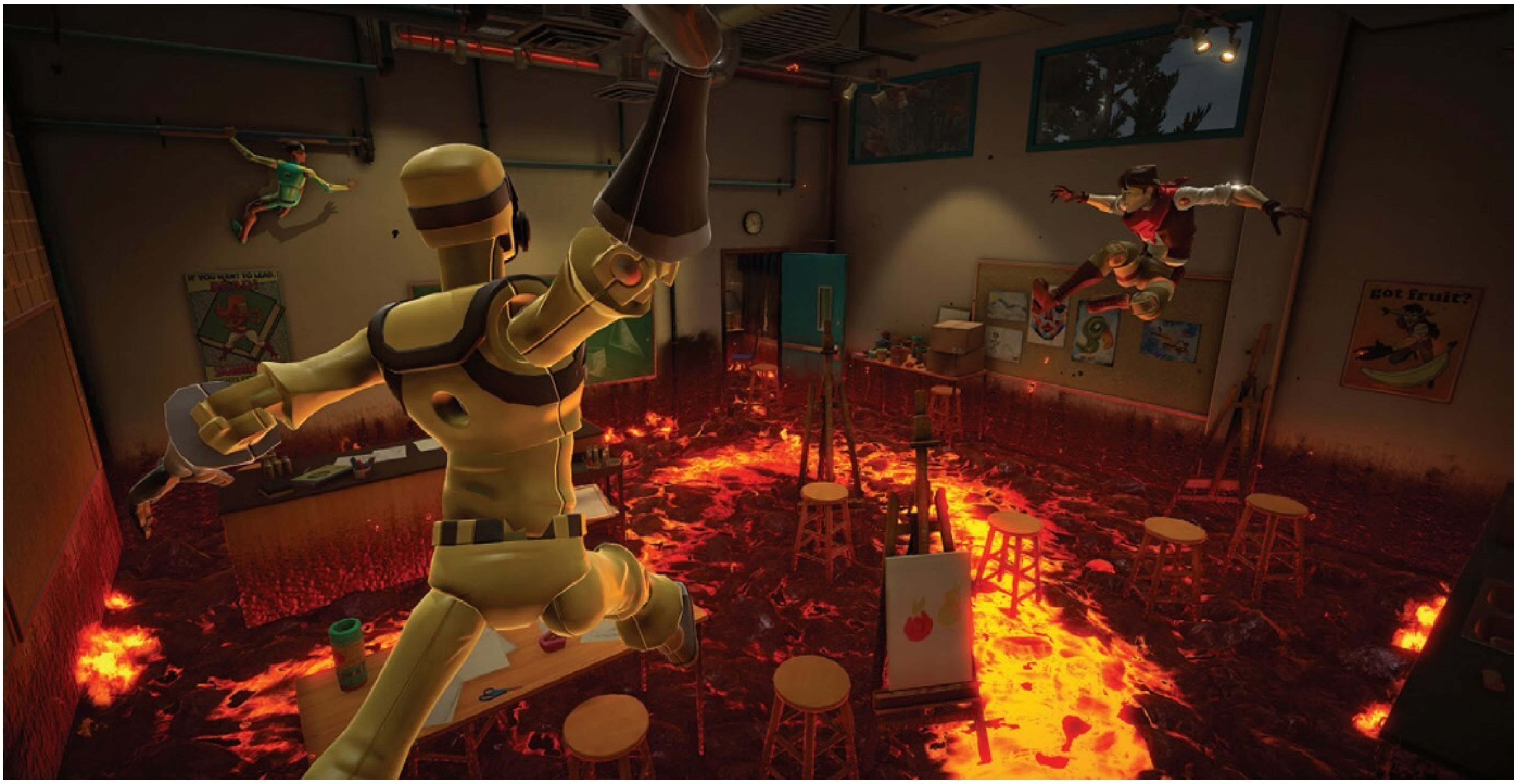
The minute-to-minute gameplay recalls titles like Mirror's Edge. You must find specific paths of safety by leaping between platforms elevated above the lava, jumping on trampolines, grabbing on to walls, and swinging from ropes and horizontal bars strategically placed throughout the environment. As you delve deeper, you also find walls you can slide along and a special goo you can bounce from. Dodging lava is challenging, but in a way that feels fair, and the resets are quick. In fact, they're so fast you often see your character completing their lava-drowning animation as you start a new run.



While trying to make the perfect run, you can watch other players attempting runs in the same level, though there is no collision. It lends the whole experience a sense of childlike wonder, but watching others is also educational for figuring out the best strategies.

Based on its premise alone, Hot Lava is worth getting excited about. We all played this game as children, leaping from couch to coffee table and pointing fingers at siblings and friends brazen enough to place their feet on the ground while our parents begged us to stop from the kitchen. Seeing this idea visualized in a video game is undeniably charming, and after spending some time with Hot Lava, we're optimistic about its potential, too.

» Kyle Hilliard



Underworld Ascendant

The original immersive sim returns

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player
Role-Playing

» Publisher
505 Games

» Developer
OtherSide Entertainment

» Release
2018

The team behind Underworld Ascendant keenly understands how easy it is to buckle under the weight of history. Ascendant acts as a spiritual sequel to 1992's Ultima Underworld, arguably one of the most important and foundational first-person games ever made due to the way it heralded a new world of sandbox gameplay. The team behind the original hopes to raise the bar on experimentation again.

Underworld Ascendant is made for everyone who has ever been frustrated by the limitations video games place on mechanics. Nearly any idea a player possesses to solve a puzzle can be applied in the game so long as the player can physically do it.

In the opening area of the game, a voice propels the Avatar to escape from a dungeon through any means possible. In an early room, a locked door stymies the Avatar. "You could sit there for a few minutes and punch the door until it cracks," says lead designer Tim Stellmach. Instead, I set a wooden box next to the door and set a lantern upside down on top of the box, turning everything involved into cinder.

Experimentation like this is the heart of Underworld Ascendant. OtherSide Entertainment wants to make the game as replayable as possible, from individual missions to the entire quest. An evolving world means that players have the opportunity to try different ideas, or tweak ones that almost worked, as they seek out new rewards and narrative goals. The world evolves as time passes, so you may return to an area to find it flooded or corrupted.

"What I want to do and what the studio wants to do is really push [immersive sims] and experiment," says OtherSide co-founder Paul Neurath. In the years since Ultima Underworld, games like Dishonored and Deus Ex have evolved the genre, but the Underworld Ascendant team still thinks it has room to grow. "We're trying to push and see what works and what doesn't work in the immersive-sim space."

Players familiar with Ultima Underworld will immediately feel at home in the Stygian Abyss

One major way Underworld Ascendant encourages experimentation is by rewarding players for trying new solutions. "There are hundreds of ways you could [solve a puzzle] because whatever solution you come up with, you earn what we call feats, and you get tangible rewards for coming up with it, but the more unique it is the more rewards you get," Neurath says.

Rewards play into a player character progression that unlocks new skills and abilties based on the actions you perform. "We wanted to get away from the grinding, so it's not the, 'I swing my sword, and on the 500th time of killing something, I now get a +1 on my sword swings,'" Neurath says. "Instead, if I'm fighting a bunch, I will unlock new kinds of abilities. Most of these abilities aren't, 'I can do more damage.' They're more like swashbuckler skills. Now I have a new skill where I can do a jump and roll or leap down on my opponent. Or I can do a wall run and get around the opponent. They tend to be more agility skills that you can combine in different ways. Like we've done magic systems in games like Underworld."

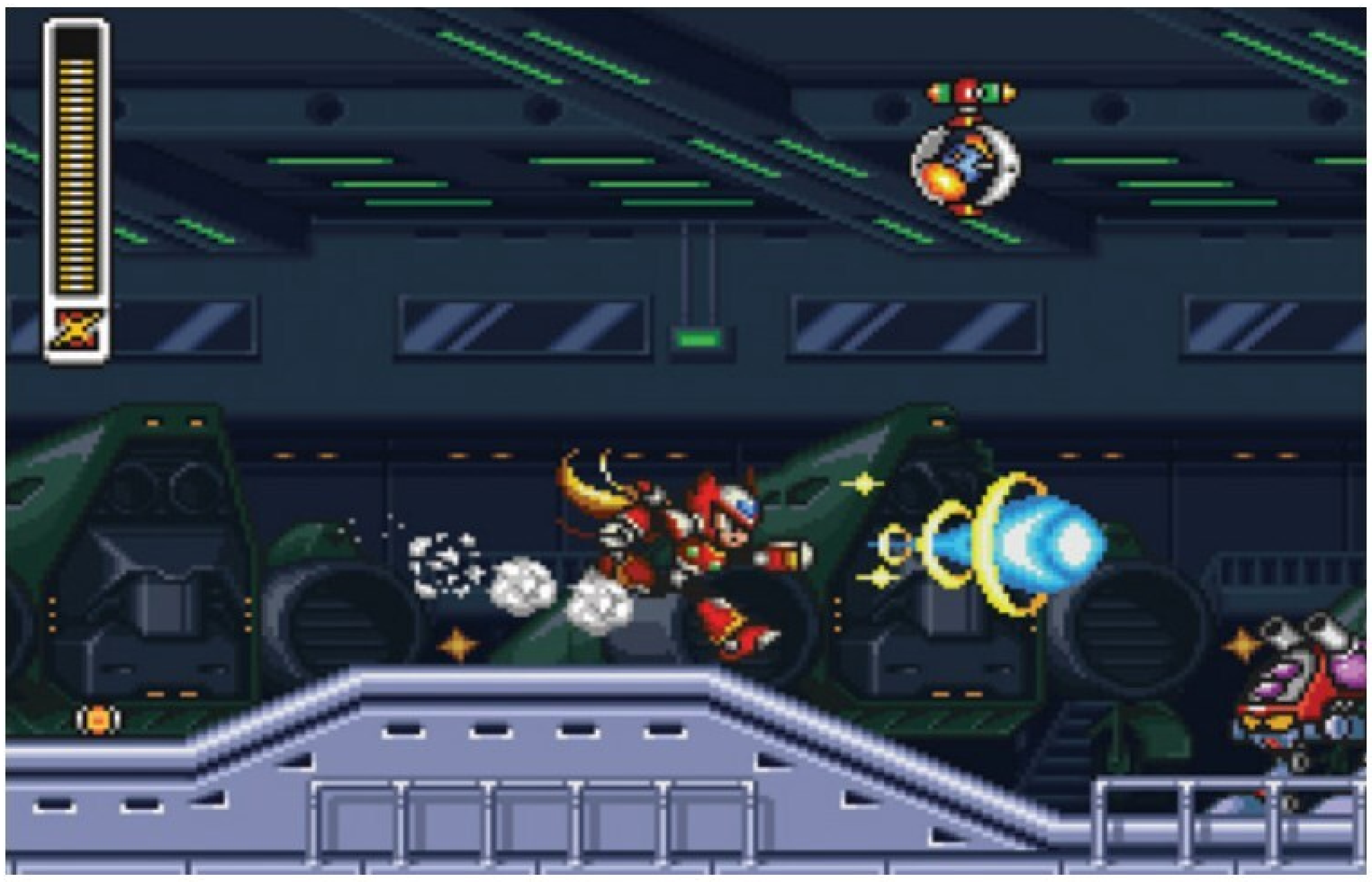
The potential is there for Underworld Ascendant to raise the bar on immersive sims and not just push the genre forward, but also change the way video game puzzles are designed and solved. **» Imran Khan**

Mega Man X Legacy Collection

A history of Maverick hunting

After remastering the original Mega Man series for modern consoles, Capcom has set its sights on bringing back its more dramatic cousin: Mega Man X. While the company has once again decided to split the series into two collections, the extra features might entice fans of the classic series to pick up both.

Mega Man Legacy Collection 1 archives the three SNES entries (Mega Man X, X2, and X3), as well as the first PlayStation release, Mega Man X4. Legacy Collection 2 includes the last two PlayStation-era games, Mega Man X5 and 6, as well as the two PlayStation 2 entries, X7 and 8. Fans will probably gravitate toward the first collection, as the three SNES games are considered classics, though I have a personal reverence for X5. It's also a little disappointing Mega Man X: Command Mission or the remake of Mega Man X, Maverick Hunter, isn't included, but this is still a solid list of games.



The two collections are available digitally for $20 apiece, but those looking for physical copies can nab a retail two-pack for $40 (though the Switch version will only have the first collection on a cartridge).

For the serious collector, having the entire series on one console (and made portable, on Switch) should pique some interest, but there are also some nice extras. The "The Day of Σ" included with Maverick Hunter is in both collections, as are several trailers, art galleries, and an encyclopedia of collectables from throughout the series' lifespan. You can also listen to the full soundtracks for each game on their respective collections, as well as a few additional remixes. Finally, a new mode, X Challenge, lets you take on two bosses from across the series at the same time, conflicting art styles and all.

» **Suriel Vazquez**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
July 24

FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY®

800.226.7625 | fullsail.edu/gameinformer

GRADS MAKING GAMES

Full Sail has specialized degree programs designed to help you gain the skill set and knowledge needed to pursue a career involving the design, computer languages, or art and animation within video games.

Our grads have worked on projects such as ***Destiny, Titanfall, Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare,*** and ***Far Cry 4.*** Grads have also worked for notable companies such as **Electronic Arts, Infinity Ward, ESPN,** and **Rockstar Games.**

3300 University Boulevard • Winter Park, FL

Financial aid available for those who qualify • Career development assistance • Accredited University, ACCSC
To review consumer disclosures, please visit fullsail.edu/gedt. © 2015 Full Sail, LLC

Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

State Of Decay 2

Spending a full day in the apocalypse

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Microsoft Studios

» Developer
Undead Labs

» Release
May 22

Countless games center on zombie outbreaks, but State of Decay stood out by setting players loose in a big open world and letting them tell their own narratives through building unique communities of survivors. While not every aspect of that first game was successful, Undead Labs delivered an intriguing take on the post-apocalypse, which it's expanding on in State of Decay 2.

Much like the original, State of Decay 2 puts you in charge of a community with the long-term goal of achieving stability and prosperity. It gives you several characters to swap among, each possessing unique attributes. Gameplay is improved over the initial entry, with more solid gunplay and intuitive melee combat. The finicky movement of the first game is also smoothed over. Even with these upgrades, permadeath mechanics still loom, meaning one wrong move could result in losing a cherished member of your group.

I witness this firsthand when a massive juggernaut zombie stops the truck I am driving dead in its tracks. I flee on foot, but it charges my character and tears her apart. Back at the base, characters reflect on their time with the now-deceased person. Morale is low, but the apocalypse doesn't allow much time to mourn.

I use the improved base screen to see what characters are most upset about. In State of Decay 2, you have more insight into why characters are upset and what you can do to make them happier. Two characters want a watchtower, while another wants a garden. I build both of these, which improves our defense and food production, as well as our group's happiness.

Once I strike a nice balance, I set out to destroy nearby Plague Hearts, a new threat in State of Decay 2. These giant, stationary vessels take up residence in buildings and mutate nearby zombies. Clearing these nests makes the area safer, but your cohorts can contract blood plague, so you need to be cautious.

State of Decay 2 also adds cooperative play. You can now explore with a group of up to four people. While you can enlist an NPC follower from your community in single-player mode, co-op gives you one major bonus: the ability to bring multiple vehicles to scavenge the region. A little extra trunk space goes a long way when your community has multiple needs. Plus, it always helps to have actual humans watching your back, especially when there's no friendly fire to worry about.

When friends join your cause, they can bring a survivor from their own communities, and swap them out whenever you return to a base. Co-op players are tethered, but they can venture in different directions to an extent. However, each building has unique crates for each player, so it makes sense to stick together. While you're ultimately contributing to the host's community during the session, non-host players can bring items back to their games.

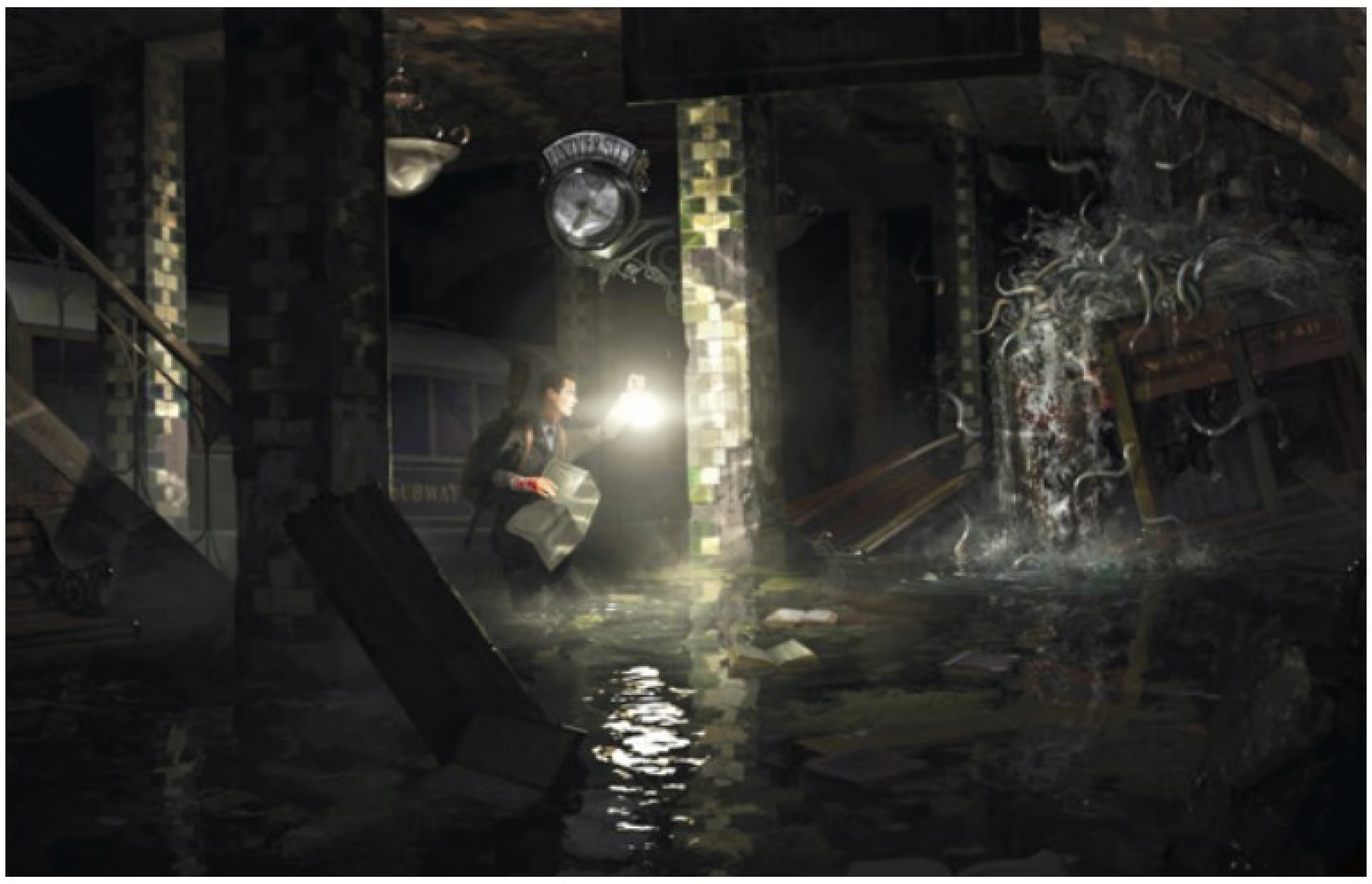
With improved controls, added co-op play, and better user-interface offerings, State of Decay 2 keeps the great concept of the first game while improving nearly every aspect around it. While some technical hiccups presented themselves in this pre-release build, State of Decay 2 already feels more stable than its predecessor did at launch. I look forward to seeing the full extent of Undead Labs' realized vision. **» Brian Shea**

The Sinking City

Exploring a Lovecraftian open world

After years of plying its trade with the Sherlock Holmes brand, Frogwares is jumping into the Lovecraftian lore revival with a new project, The Sinking City.

Whereas many other games integrate elements of Lovecraftian fiction like antiquated language, reclusive and detached heroes, xenophobia, and that narrow gap between sanity and insanity, The Sinking City wraps all of these into one faithful package that uses Lovecraft's oeuvre as canon for an open-world experience. The game follows the journey of a private investigator drawn to a New England city by its strange predicament. A half-year ago, the city suddenly flooded for no good reason, rendering the city nonfunctional, and ominous monoliths rose from the waters. But rather than evacuating, the denizens seem perfectly content living in their newfound water world. Even stranger, others seem to be drawn to the city as well.



The Sinking City leverages the investigative chops Frogwares developed over its past several Sherlock Holmes games, but expands beyond the studio's comfort zone with an open-world environment. Your wily gumshoe can visit any of the seven city districts at any time as he tries to find out what the hell is going on here, many of which require him to hop on a boat to navigate the flooded streets. The game has minimal hand-holding, opting for a clean screen rather than inundating the player with minimaps and waypoints. It adds a cinematic flair and lets you take in the foreboding atmosphere of the city.

Though the stilted voice acting we saw in an early demo could use a serious injection of passion, the setting, investigation tools, and lure of a Lovecraftian open world make The Sinking City one worth keeping an eye on. » **Matt Bertz**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Bigben Interactive

» Developer
Frogwares

» Release
TBA

MAY

REWARDS CENTER

FEATURED ITEMS

PLAYER
ELITE PRO
PRO
GameStop POWERUP REWARDS
11,500 pts
XBOX LIVE $10 Digital Currency
3,900 pts
XBOX LIVE $3 Digital Currency
5,500 pts
Nintendo eShop $5 Digital Currency
11,000 pts
Nintendo eShop $10 Digital Currency
3,900 pts
PlayStation Store $3 Digital Currency
11,500 pts
PlayStation Store $10 Digital Currency
GameStop $5 Reward Certificate
5,000 pts
GameStop $10 Reward Certificate
10,000 pts
GameStop $25 Reward Certificate
25,000 pts
THINKGEEK $15 Reward Certificate
15,000 pts
THINKGEEK $10 Reward Certificate
10,000 pts
THINKGEEK $5 Reward Certificate
5,000 pts

Find these items and more at **www.PowerUpRewards.com**

GameStop POWERUP REWARDS

reviews

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

86 God of War

The new game from Sony's Santa Monica studio may be called God of War, but it is a drastic reinvention of the series. Though it still delivers great gameplay and epic moments, it does so in bold new ways, placing an older and quieter Kratos and his son at the center of an unforgettable journey. The evolving relationship between the two characters is captivating, the desolate world is gorgeous, and the tactical action keeps you engaged during every encounter. This is the best God of War has ever been; whether you're a longtime fan or an intrigued newcomer, you simply need to play this game.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Points required to beat Billy Mitchell's new Donkey Kong high score.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

SUPER MARIO™

Power up your home decor!

Bring some Super Mario fandom home with these exclusive lamps.

TM & © 2017 ® Nintendo.

COOL STUFF AND COLLECTIBLES FOR GAMING, SCI-FI & MORE.
Shop online or find a location near you at **thinkgeek.com/locations**

THINKGEEK®
JOIN IN. GEEK OUT.®

Far Cry 5

Big sigh country

7.5

Style 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** March 27 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Battle a weird Montana cult while exploring the expansive world of Hope County alone or with a friend

» Graphics
Ubisoft has beautifully captured the essence of the American west, with rugged mountains, lush plains, and landscapes that will have you pining for a photo mode

» Sound
Hallucinogenic sequences are amplified with trippy distortion effects. Unfortunately, weapons don't have much audio oomph to them

» Playability
Shaping the flow of battle on the fly is easy, though once you find techniques that work, you have few incentives to experiment

» Entertainment
Virtually everything about Far Cry 5 is thoroughly okay. For a series that has provided so many thrills and surprises, that's a major disappointment

» Replay Value
Moderately high

After targeting tin-pot dictators and megalomaniacs across the globe, Far Cry 5 sets its sights closer to home. This entry moves the open-world mayhem to Hope County, Montana – a beautiful base of operations for outdoorspeople, rugged individualists, and a murderous death cult. It's also a playground for the explosive antics that we've come to expect from the series, where you and a friend can seamlessly go from taking down an armed convoy to bow hunting to fly fishing – or flying a plane – depending on what sounds fun. Once the luster of the new setting and co-op companionship wears thin, however, you're left with an experience that's familiar to a fault.

Hope County has been overrun by Joseph Seed, leader of an apocalyptic cult called Project at Eden's Gate. A disastrous raid on Joseph's compound leaves your created character, a rookie sheriff's deputy, alone and outnumbered in a hostile environment. It's an interesting setup, but soon settles into a standard routine. Your job is to clear out the Peggies (the local slur for the cultists) by any means necessary – most of which boils down to destroying outposts and taking on missions for the locals. Joseph has a lot of land to cover, and he's a master at delegating. His church heralds include the charismatic John Seed; hunter of man Jacob Seed; and psy-ops hippie Faith Seed. These three walking archetypes have little consistency between them apart from their last names.

Far Cry 5 isn't as provocative as its posturing may lead you to believe. Its exploration of religious extremism is too bizarre to be taken seriously, and it's delivered with a self-serious tone it doesn't earn. You get knocked out, abducted, and tied to a chair a ridiculous number of times. Since your character is mute and can't (or won't) engage in conversation, you end up with extended scenes where vamping bad guys talk at your immobilized form and over-explain their half-baked philosophies. Some moments attempt to subvert your expectations, but they're generally limp commentaries along the lines of saying, "Ah, yes, but have you considered that YOU are the real villain here?"

The story doesn't offer many big surprises or payoffs, and the same can be said for the gameplay. It's competent on most fronts, providing a massive world to explore and an arsenal of destructive tools, but it doesn't feel fresh. Taking down outposts doesn't provide any new thrills or challenges, and new items like proximity bombs don't open up encounters. Past games introduced strategy and light puzzle elements as you were rewarded for staking out these camps and figuring out how to take advantage of their weak spots. The Peggies seem more interested in maintaining their human flock than setting up decent defenses.

Ubisoft Montreal made bold breaks from past games in a couple of major ways. First, your deputy doesn't reveal the world around them by climbing towers to get a better view. Instead, you remove the fog on your map by doing missions and finding maps scattered in ranger stations and other structures in the world. Environmental puzzles are still here in the form of lucrative prepper caches, which are one of my favorite parts of Far Cry 5. Each one offers a unique challenge, which can include escaping a trapped bunker or navigating a mountain obstacle course, with big rewards at the end of each one.

The second major break from tradition is a decreased focus on hunting; animal pelts are only redeemable for cash, and are no longer associated with crafting. I always enjoyed the survival aspect from past games, as silly as it was, and it felt strange to see a previously important part of the series fall to the side like that. Instead of using skins to build holsters and ammo pouches, now you invest points in upgrades as you see fit. The game is generous with the points, which you earn through mission progression and challenges, and it's easy to prioritize abilities to how you like to play.

For the first time in the Far Cry series, you can play through the entire campaign in co-op. Having a second player around makes the game significantly more entertaining (even if the difficulty balance seems tailored for one), and exploring the playground together is a blast. I had a great time tormenting my partner, whether I was luring him under beehives, blowing up dynamite inside our plane, or rigging his car with explosives. Players are tethered together, so you aren't able to freely roam around the entire world independently, but it's a generously long leash.

Far Cry 5's world is meticulously constructed, and it's a remarkable facsimile of Big Sky Country. Unfortunately, too much of the action that takes place in it is uninspired. It's a beautiful but bland recitation of what's come before, from both the series and Ubisoft's open-world playbook. It's never bad, but considering how great the past games have been, its predictability is disappointing.

» Jeff Cork

It's worth exploring every structure that you come across; you never know what you'll find inside
KNOW YOUR PURPOSE
ENTRANCE

Razing the Steaks
FOLLOW Zip
Lean Out

Minit

A bite-sized delight

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** JW, Kitty, Jukio, and Dom **Release** April 3 **Rating** E

8

PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Mac

» Concept
Complete quests, solve puzzles, and defeat foes in 60-second intervals

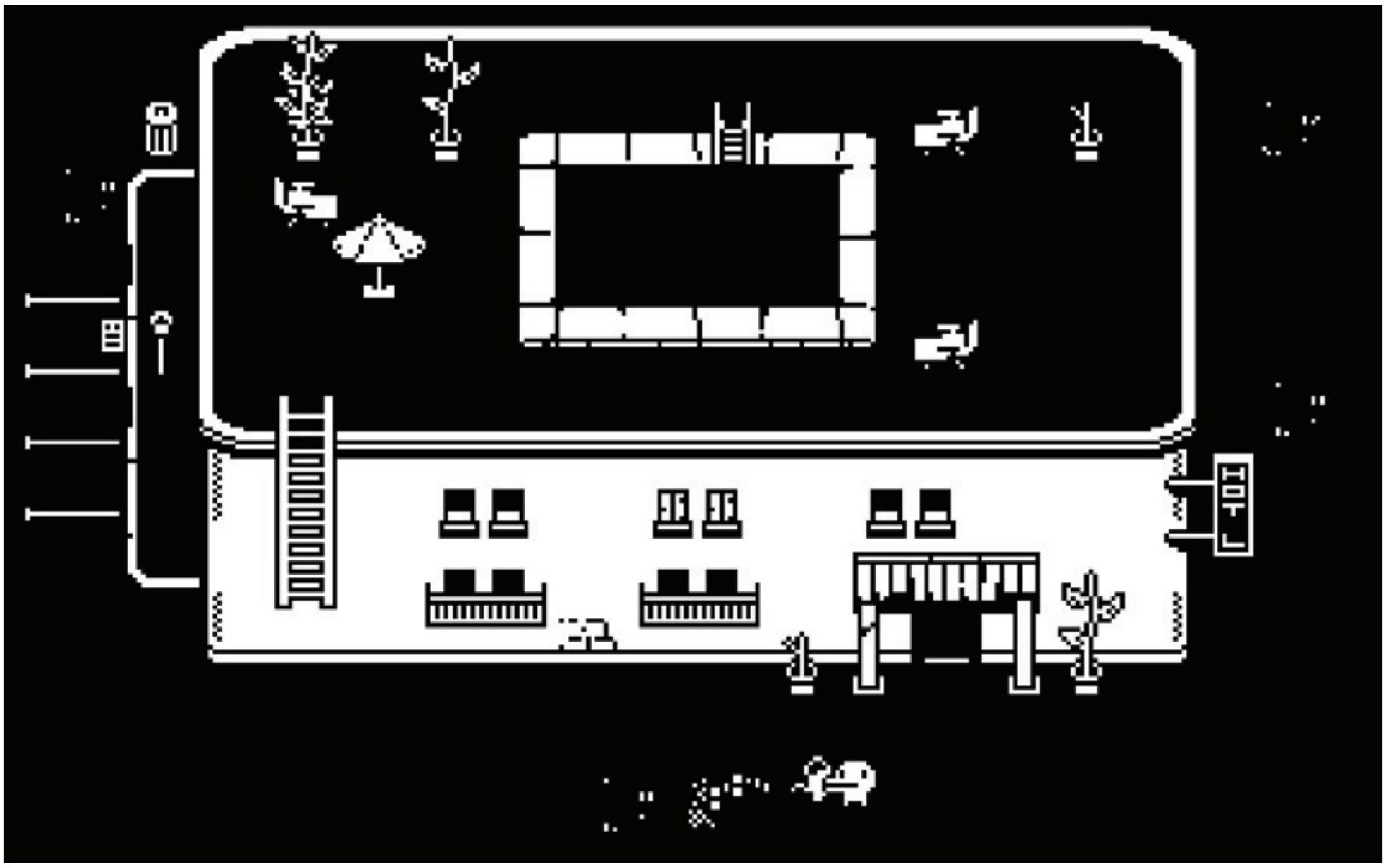
» Graphics
The black-and-white, Game Boy-like aesthetics makes the intriguing world charming in its simplicity

» Sound
Catchy, fast-paced tunes add a sense of urgency as the clock ticks down to zero

» Playability
Easy-to-use controls make maneuvering around the world and uncovering secrets a joy

» Entertainment
Minit offers a compelling world, and its clever concept is tied to progression in satisfying ways

» Replay Value
Moderate



Building a sense of urgency and putting pressure on the player to complete a task quickly is something video games have achieved across many genres and decades. Minit, a charming top-down adventure reminiscent of classic Zelda titles, takes this concept to an extreme by creatively confining your adventuring to 60-second intervals.

Your main objective is to explore the fascinating monochromatic world as you fight enemies, solve puzzles, and complete quests. However, a timer begins once you pick up a cursed sword. From then on, you're stuck in an infinite loop of death every minute. Though this can seem anxiety-inducing and punishing (especially at first), it becomes addictive as you establish a rhythm to make the most of your short lives.

Because of its focus on steady progression, Minit is rarely frustrating. Various obstacles initially limit your options, but as you steadily collect items to overcome them, you can venture further out. For example, a watering can extinguishes flames, and flippers let you swim. You never lose items when you die, which makes each new acquisition feel like a satisfying checkpoint.

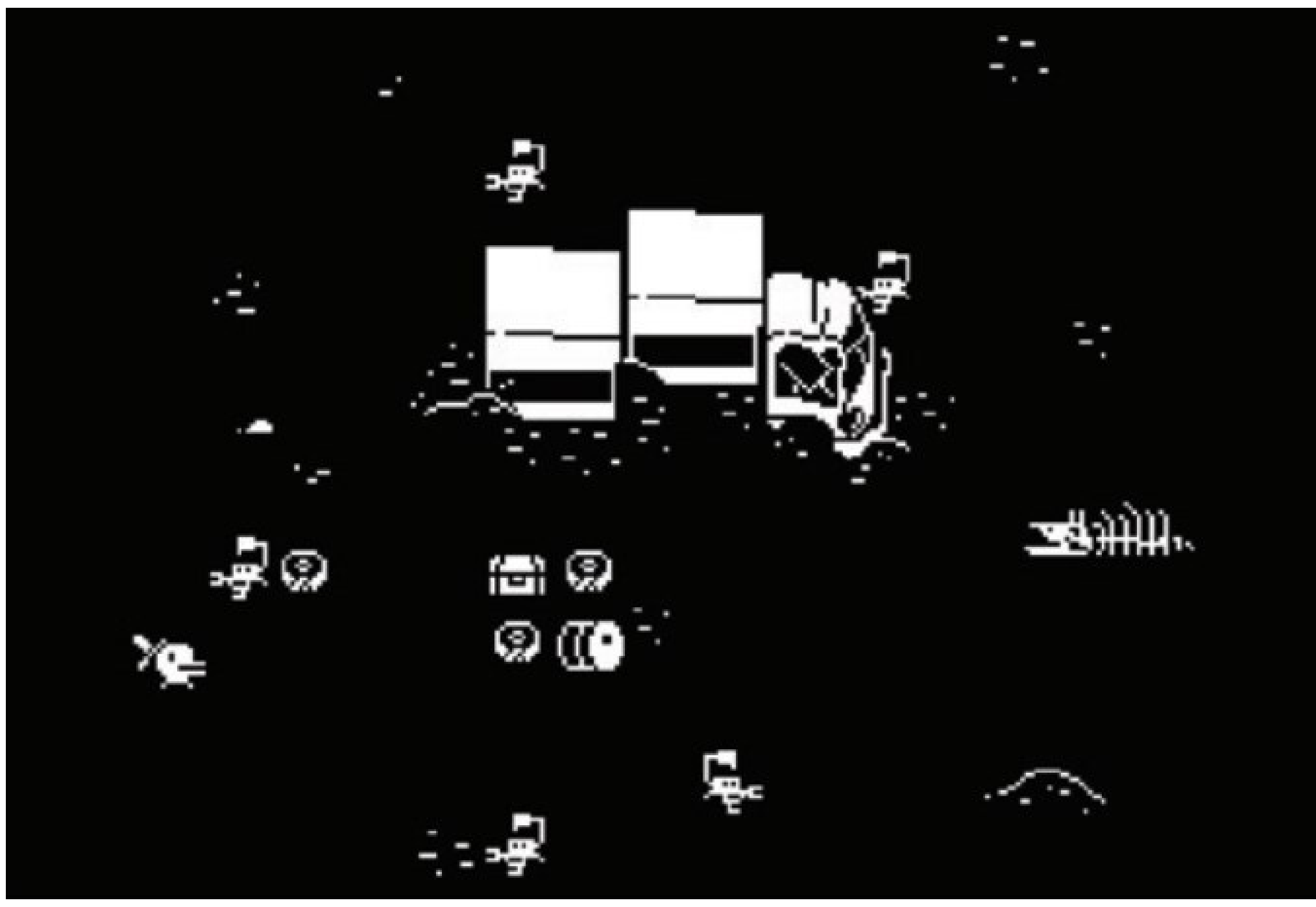
Items are found by completing quests like helping lost hotel guests out of precarious situations, defeating enemies like a group of foes disguised as plants, or by scouring the world. Objects help you enter places that were previously inaccessible, including a desert landscape rife with secrets and a haunted mansion. I enjoy how this formula consistently pushes players into new areas, keeping the journey focused on moving forward.

The top-down combat is simple but fun. Your sword is your sole weapon, but Minit brings impressive puzzle twists to the otherwise straightforward battles. For example, when ambushed by a certain group of foes, you can complete a quest by identifying the weaponless, frightened bandit and sparing him while killing the rest.

With each death, you return to whichever home you last occupied. This brings a fun strategic element to Minit, where you attempt to find the quickest route to your objectives. With death always on the horizon, you're forced to think efficiently and quickly, making each run feel like a puzzle in and of itself.

Exploring the monochromatic world and discovering secrets is a joy. Minit is filled with personality and gags, like a turtle who comically speaks so slowly it requires an entire life to hear him out. Quests are often exploration-based, such as finding a sea monster's lost tentacles or helping a local rebuild his boat so he can bring you to a faraway island. I especially enjoyed the latter, which opened up a new location with its own unique secrets.

Minit is short and sweet. Its clever mechanic doesn't overstay its welcome, but an abrupt ending left me wanting more. Thankfully, a new game+ mode adds increased difficulty and new secrets for dedicated players. With its creative premise, stylish aesthetic, and engrossing progression system, Minit makes racing against the clock a compelling endeavor – even if it means dying a hundred deaths. » **Elise Favis**



God Of War

Reaching a higher summit

9.75

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer Santa Monica Studio **Release** April 20 **Rating** M

PS4

» **Concept**
A sublime reinvention of the God of War series that adds new layers of depth in gameplay and storytelling without sacrificing epic moments

» **Graphics**
The world and characters come alive with fantastic design and gorgeous visuals. A more intimate camera ups the intensity of moments big and small

» **Sound**
From the quiet tracks to the thunderous climaxes, Bear McCreary's score supports the action and establishes an interesting tone

» **Playability**
Despite a variety of different attacks, the controls make it easy to strategize in combat and use your full array of abilities

» **Entertainment**
An enthralling experience from beginning to end, with a mixture of great narrative moments and engaging encounters. God of War is a well-paced adventure that knows when to let the action simmer and when to make it boil over

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

In gruff moments of fatherly instruction, Kratos repeats the phrase "be better" to his son, Atreus. This happens in different contexts, but the lesson remains consistent: Your decisions are not bound by precedent, and the choices of others are not examples to follow – they only set standards you can strive to exceed. In developing the latest God of War, Sony's Santa Monica studio apparently took this message to heart. While previous games in this series established a successful formula of stylish action and epic set pieces, the team used this opportunity to be better. With surprising changes on every front, God of War forges a new identity and surpasses even its most acclaimed predecessors.

As a longtime fan of the series, this entry captivated me for completely different reasons. The narrative is one of them, despite its simple premise: Kratos and Atreus need to reach the top of the highest mountain in the Norse domain. They encounter detours and surprises along the way, but the precise story beats are less important than how they are conveyed. God of War brilliantly presents a desolate journey in a gorgeous world, all through the lens of the relationship between a distant father and his eager son.

The interactions of Kratos and Atreus range from adversarial to compassionate, and these exchanges have ample room to breathe and draw players in. Atreus wonders what he might say to his departed mother if given the chance – an exercise Kratos finds pointless. When Kratos artlessly paraphrases the fable of the tortoise and the hare, Atreus mocks his lack of storytelling prowess. These quiet moments are interesting, slowly and believably closing the distance between two characters – a focus that contrasts sharply with previous games. In terse responses and long silences, Kratos conveys more than he ever did cursing Olympus at the top of his lungs.

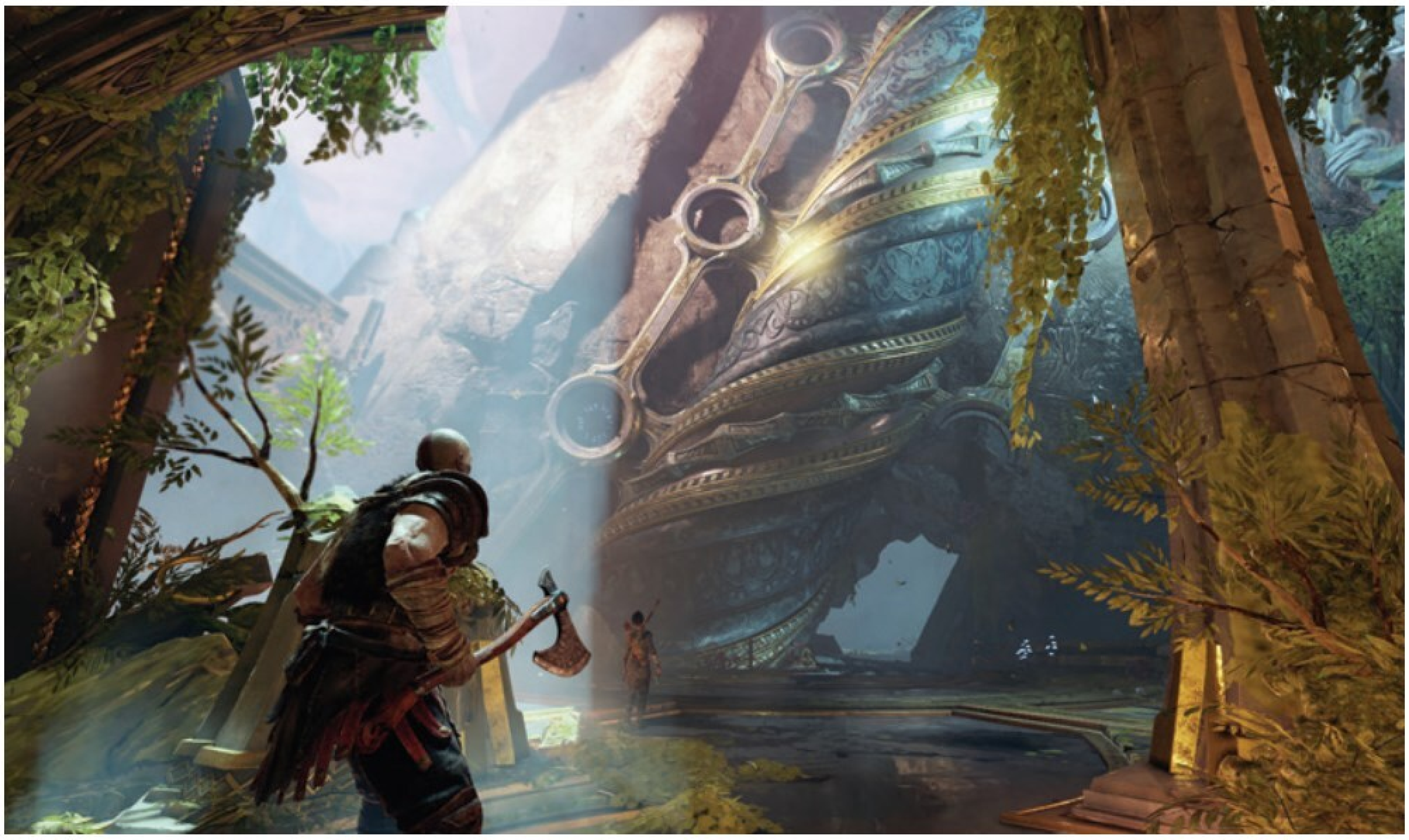
That isn't to say God of War has sacrificed its ability to deliver incredible spectacle. An early encounter (against a mysterious enemy called the Stranger) sets the bar absurdly high, and a cathartic sequence later on stands out as my favorite moment in the series to date. Between those points and beyond, the adventure is punctuated by a steady flow of enormous beasts, ancient architecture, and intense boss fights. The environments and characters look fantastic, and a new cinematic camera angle brings you close the action and never cuts away – a decision that proves immensely rewarding during big moments by giving you an intimate view. Despite this more grounded approach to presentation, the action's scope and ambition is stunning in cutscenes and combat alike.

The Greek world may be gone, but Kratos is still a god of war, and his skill on the battlefield is appropriately divine. He fires off magic attacks and performs brutal executions in his attempts to defeat a clever assortment of foes from Norse myth. The ice-infused axe Leviathan is a drastic departure from the iconic Blades of Chaos Kratos once wielded, but it is a well-balanced and entertaining tool of destruction. I like how it emphasizes a more calculated style of combat; instead of zoomed-out, combo-driven encounters, Leviathan makes you a tactician. You can't cut through huge swaths of enemies with it,

so you need to consider how to manage your foes. You can freeze one from afar by throwing your axe, then use your fists to stun and grab another, then recall Leviathan for an area-of-effect ice burst. This kind of strategy gives many fights – especially one-on-one bosses – an engaging duel-like quality. Plus, the "thunk" of Leviathan magically flying back into Kratos' hand is satisfying every time.

During the first few hours, I had doubts about the axe-and-shield emphasis. In those opening segments, crowded melees are difficult to navigate due to off-screen attacks, which encouraged me to keep my distance – at least until I got more comfortable with key mechanics like parrying. After that, I quickly came around; the combat system's gradual unfolding in God of War is a joy. Though it may feel restrictive at first, before long you are rapidly alternating between all the tools and skills at your disposal, including your fists, Spartan Rage, Leviathan, and more. Cooldown-regulated runic attacks provide a diverse and unique array of special moves, like a freezing beam or a stunning blast, and I had fun experimenting with them and seeing which ones I wanted to cycle into my regular rotation.

You spend experience to unlock cool new techniques, and they aren't just damage or range improvements; several have a significant impact on your options, like Kratos assuming a secondary stance from which additional attacks are possible. I also leaned on Atreus for assistance, since his arrows are crucial for incapacitating many creatures. Some of these concepts are introduced too slowly, but on the other hand, I relished how God of War's battles avoid stagnation through constant evolution.



Underlying all of your combat endeavors is a surprisingly involved gear system that gives you an avenue to customize your arsenal, but also dangles aspirational goals in front of you. Many of your deeds provide materials and equipment as rewards, and like an RPG, you see the numbers next to your stats increase as you build and equip new items. You also see materials you don't have for pieces of gear you want to craft, which adds to the excitement when that item finally drops after finishing a sidequest or beating a tough foe. This layer of upgrading may be less exciting than learning new moves to chop up monsters, but it still provides a powerful incentive to explore.

While not strictly open-world, the game has a large lake with various shores and islands available for free exploration. I loved systematically checking out new locations and acquiring crafting materials, enchantments, and other rewards. These excursions are largely optional, but they are the best way to ensure that you have everything you need for equipment upkeep. As a bonus, these diversions flesh out the world with some interesting NPCs, in addition to offering some fun (but not too challenging) puzzle-like scenarios. They can provide a nice break from the main story, but they're always available, so you don't need to invest in them at the expense of the narrative pacing.

God of War's momentum rarely falters, and when it does, the inconvenience is brief. For example, you have the freedom to explore, but the map isn't especially helpful for tracking your position relative to the things you are interested in, and the fast-travel system is weirdly cumbersome and opens up too late. This is more frustrating if you plan on being thorough with collectibles and post-game objectives (no new game+ this time around), but that didn't dampen my enthusiasm for climbing cliffs and delving into ruins long after the 30 hours I spent finishing the main story.

Years ago, Kratos killed the deities of Mount Olympus in a gory rampage. Now, in the Norse realm, he has remade himself into a different kind of god. He is quieter and more deliberate, affected by his history but not confined to it. Kratos' reinvention serves as a narrative hook, but it also parallels the series' evolution as a whole. Where God of War once relied on bombast and bloodlust, now it leaves space for strategy and nuance. It still has superb action and plenty of jaw-dropping moments, but it supports them with a new level of depth and maturity. God of War learns from its past while clearing an exciting new path for the future, and emerges as one of the best games of this generation.

» **Joe Juba**

MLB The Show 18

The online slump continues

6.75

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Sony Interactive Entertainment San Diego Studio **Release** March 27 **Rating** E

PS4

» **Concept**
Better than ever between the foul lines, but the pursuit of online stability hasn't paid off for this year's iteration

» **Graphics**
New cutaway shots bring out the flavor of the game between pitches, and the small transitional animations on the field up the realism. The player creator is also deeper than before, and even allows you to sculpt your own batting stance

» **Sound**
The commentary often offers great insight into the history of the sport and the strategy players deploy, but is also highly repetitive. Color commentator Mark DeRosa is repeated the most

» **Playability**
Gives players complete control of the action and at the skill level they feel the most comfortable. Developing a player in Road to the Show is a more rewarding experience this year

» **Entertainment**
The online play is clearly where Sony wants people to spend time, but just connecting to the servers proves problematic

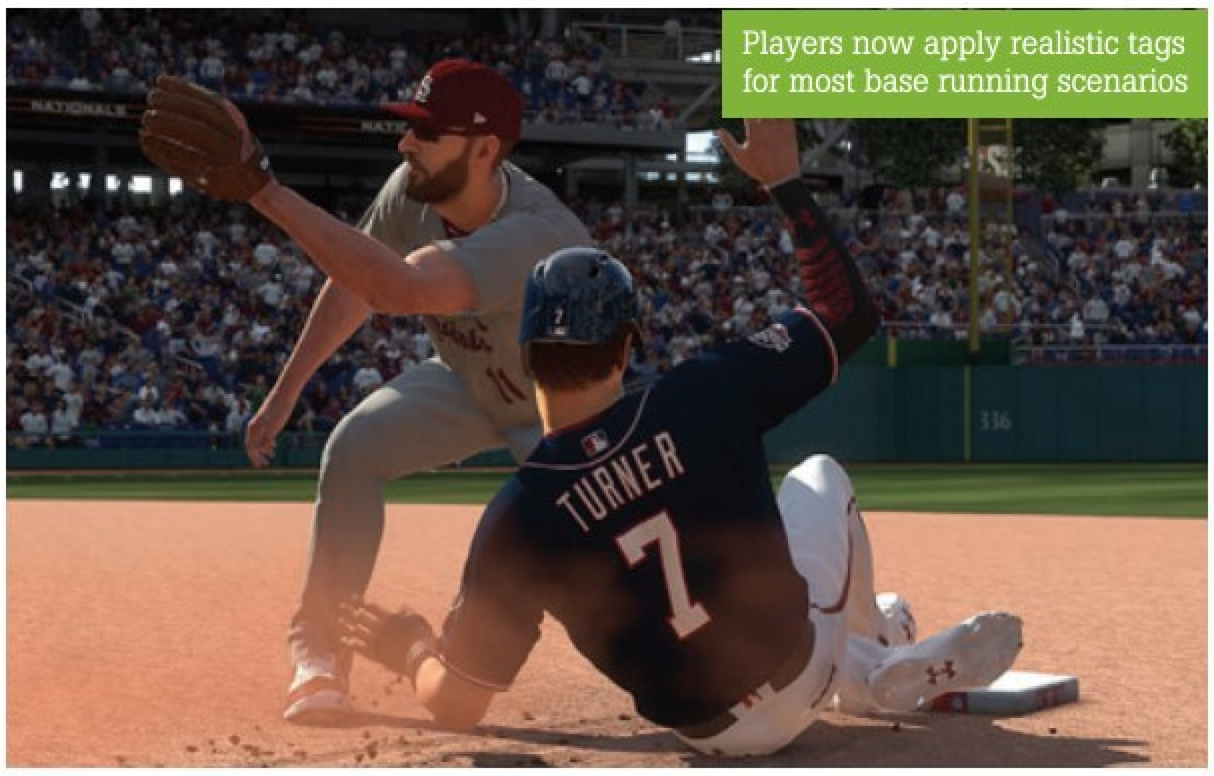
» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The boo-birds come out when perennial all-stars are ice cold in the opening months of the season. Fans believe these players didn't take care of themselves in the offseason, and treated spring training like a vacation. In reality, April's frigid weather and windy conditions impact player abilities and limit the flight of the ball. As the weather heats up, so do these players.

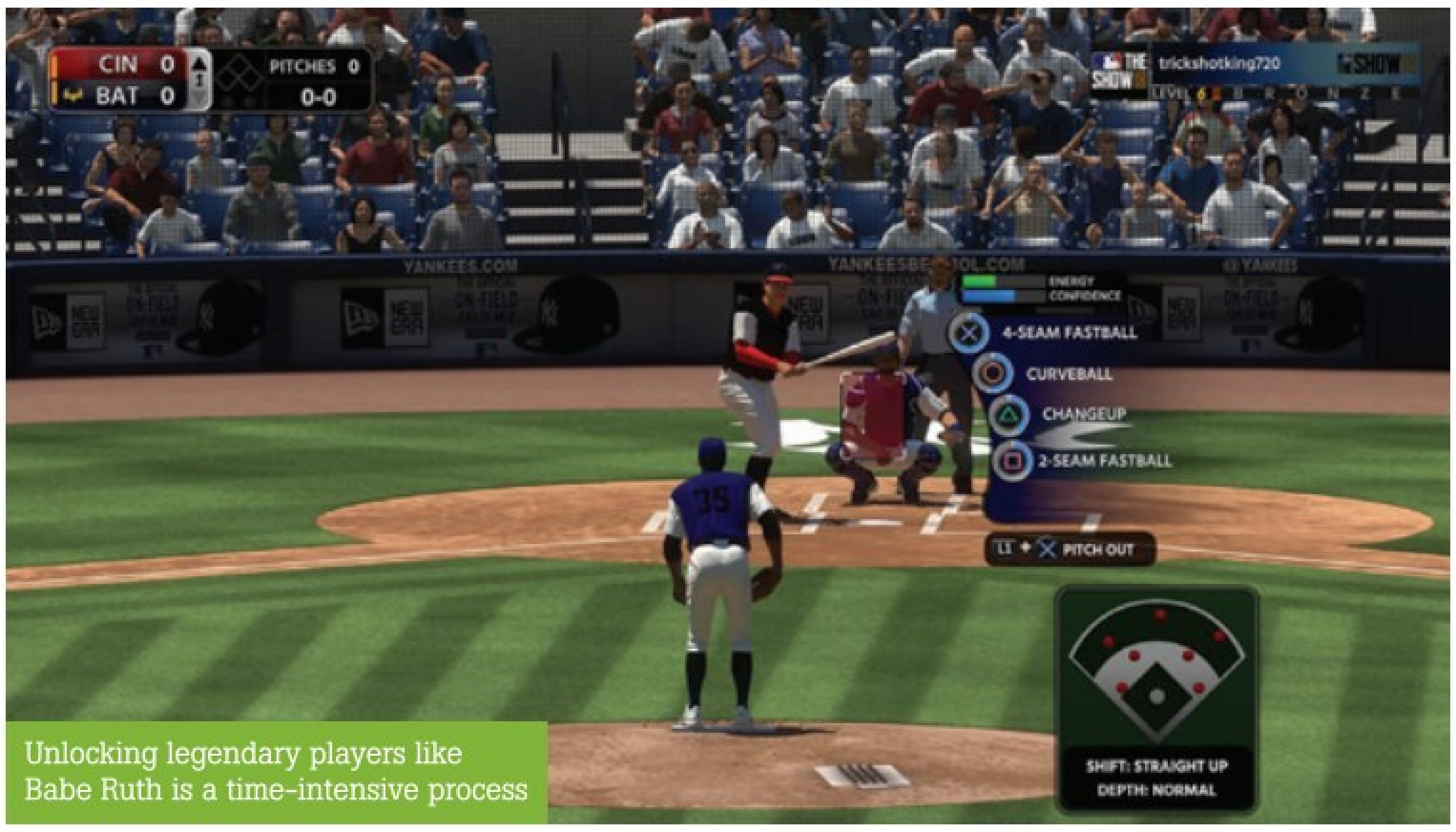
MLB The Show 18 is the video game equivalent of the slow starter. Online performance issues have become an unwanted annualized feature – so much so that Sony made online infrastructure a central focus of development this year. In previous years, Sony has patched up or stabilized the online experience as the season progressed. This year, the development team didn't want the online experience to start out cold, but achieving this goal meant difficult cuts.

In prioritizing new technology, Sony was forced to remove online franchise from this year's game. Offline season mode is also oddly absent. These are two huge avenues of play that delivered different experiences for people – whether it's shortening up a season for a breezier path to the playoffs or spending significant time battling friends for the pennant. Both are gone.

Did the cuts pay off? As of this writing, MLB The Show 18's online performance has not improved over previous years. Along with intermittent latency issues on the field, which can lead to players running past balls or pitches accidentally served up as meat, all online avenues of play are subject to inexplicable loss of progress. A productive morning of playing Battle Royale ended with my experience points and Stubs disappearing, never to return. On another day, I couldn't locate some cards I purchased with Stubs, and wasn't reimbursed for them.



Players now apply realistic tags for most base running scenarios



Unlocking legendary players like Babe Ruth is a time-intensive process

Stability isn't the only frustrating element of online. As much as I love seeing legendary players like Vida Blue taking on Babe Ruth, the means to obtaining these players is comical. To unlock the best version of Jackie Robinson, I need to get Chase Utley's program souvenir, another program that isn't even in the game yet and is listed as "coming soon," exchange dozens of hats and jerseys, tally 10 hits with a different version of Jackie Robinson ONLY on April 15, and/or perform a bunch of other crazy tasks.

The Show's troubles are mostly contained to just the online component. As usual, Sony has refined the action on the field, which is better than ever this year. New ball physics lead to a wider variety of hits and bounces, and players react to situations in more realistic ways – such as a batter holding up in the batter's box for a brief second to see if a ball is slicing foul, or a catcher pouncing on a squibber or blocking a ball in the dirt. Catchers get out of stance much faster and can't be exploited as easily. Fielders are more aware of the runners and apply more authentic tags, depending on how the runner moves. Opponent A.I. is also much savvier, using more shifts and deploying different bullpen and hitting strategies for specific situations.

The flow of the game is also enhanced with a wider variety of shots of fans, the stadium, coaches, and players. Full-motion replays also add to the broadcast presentation, even though Mark DeRosa's color commentary is frequently repeated or too generalized.

The control you have over the action is largely unchanged, but you get a better insight into what went wrong with your swing through the redesigned feedback system. The revamped ball physics lead to more hit types and player reactions, but I saw an unusual number of balls bobbled and dropped.

Road to the Show received the most tweaks in terms of how progress is logged. You can no longer create a player capable of reaching level 99 in every category. You must now select an archetype, which has strengths and weaknesses that are capped in specific categories. It makes more sense to hone those skills, and I love the move away from assigning experience points. All gains and losses come on the field and through training. Players get called up quicker if they are tearing it up; my Road the Show player from last year was immediately called up to the majors. That's awesome.

Franchise mode is improved, not from additions, but the streamlining of menus and tasks. All aspects of managing a team are broken up into phases that cover the draft, trades, mid-season play, and more. All of these areas feature shortcuts and can be turned to manual or auto with just a click of a button. Sony also added Retro mode as a style of play for Franchise, which is a bit odd given the arcade framework works against the simulation stats to a degree, but it is fun to compete in a throwback game from time to time.

Load times for all avenues of play are better, and the play on the field is once again a showpiece of iteration, but the online aspect of the game – where Sony is focusing the most for additions – remains unpredictable at best and completely broken at its worst. As the season goes along, the experience will hopefully get better, but for the hardcore baseball fans that purchased the game early, it can be a nightmare.
» **Andrew Reiner**

Frostpunk

A frigid, unrelenting survival success

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** 11 Bit Studios **Developer** 11 Bit Studios **Release** April 24 **Rating** M

I rule a city in crisis. The next ice age is coming, and people will die as the blizzard worsens. With supplies diminishing and hope fading, discontent sets in and people are talking about my ouster. Backed into a corner, I name myself the supreme ruler, a semi-religious deity whose word is bond. Those who rebel must publicly repent. I feel dirty about this decision, but I'm convinced that if we silence dissent, most of us will do what's necessary to get through this. But what if it doesn't work?

Horrible decisions like this are a regular occurrence in Frostpunk, the callous, intriguing, and addictive city-building simulation from the studio behind This War of Mine. In this thematic follow-up, players assume command of one of the last human caravans in an alternate-history nineteenth century. You must will a solitary outpost forward in the face of unrelenting cold weather, dwindling natural resources, and an unsettled populace looking for hope wherever they can find it. The job isn't easy, but it's also unforgettable.

You may walk into this situation with firmly held ideals about human rights, but an avalanche of dire circumstances tests those beliefs. When faced with injuries that halt your resource gathering, do you forcibly amputate limbs to keep the victims working, or do you create an invalid ward that puts yet another stress on productivity that may endanger the entire outpost? The immediate benefits of instituting draconian laws are tough to pass up when your society is struggling, but that doesn't make them any easier to swallow. Giving players these moments of doubt and regret is Frostpunk's biggest triumph.

Frostpunk is a min-maxer's nightmare. Manpower is always stretched thin, so efficiencies are rarely optimized. The art of survival comes down to thinking two or three moves ahead. When a deep freeze is on the horizon, you may need to shift priorities to making sure your generator has enough coal to keep your vital operations heated, often at the expense of your other necessities.

The real leadership struggle comes when multiple needs arise at the same time and compete for your limited manpower. Trying to devise a plan for surviving a giant storm that threatened to cease any food gathering options and blow out my overworked heat generator literally kept me up one night. Could I realistically keep discontent from rising when making tough calls during this impossible situation, or was I doomed to be killed like so many other rulers who overstepped the bounds of what is socially acceptable? That's when I decided to drug my populace with the opiate of the masses. I felt hypocritical doing it, but at least I created the hope necessary to power through a storm that killed half the settlement. Therein lies the beauty of Frostpunk; the crisis management has your mind reeling with potential problems and solutions so you hardly notice the people behind the curtain placing you in these unforgiving predicaments.

The design only falters when a story beat takes away some of that freedom and forces players to choose between two law paths that could lead to totalitarianism or a religious zealotry. You're never obligated to implement any of the more overreaching laws, but sometimes they are the only way out of a dire situation. I appreciate forcing players to make tough decisions, but the game does that anyway without strong-arming players down ideological paths.

Given the do-or-die nature of every action you take in Frostpunk, getting players up to speed quickly is paramount. While developer 11 Bit largely succeeds in its onboarding, poorly explaining the dynamic of how certain buildings interact with one another caused a few early failures from which it was impossible to recover. Restarting missions provides a few variable elements, but the campaign largely follows the same beats. Injecting more variety into the story could have eased the repetition; right now, the only motivation for replaying is to do better or try new ideological approaches.

In addition to the main story campaign, Frostpunk includes two other scenarios, one to preserve the last seed banks on the planet by optimizing automation, and another to provide refuge for settlers and protect them from their former overlords. Both test your leadership in new ways, and though they are much shorter than the campaign, they are worthwhile.

Rarely does an interactive experience keep me awake at night wrestling with big decisions. Frostpunk did this on multiple occasions, and made me feel squeamish when forcing edicts upon society instead of building consensus. Extraordinary circumstances call for desperate measures, and all I can do is ask for forgiveness from those trampled by my headstrong approach.

» **Matt Bertz**

8.75

PC

» **Concept**
Take control of the last bastion of humanity and try to survive the onset of a new ice age

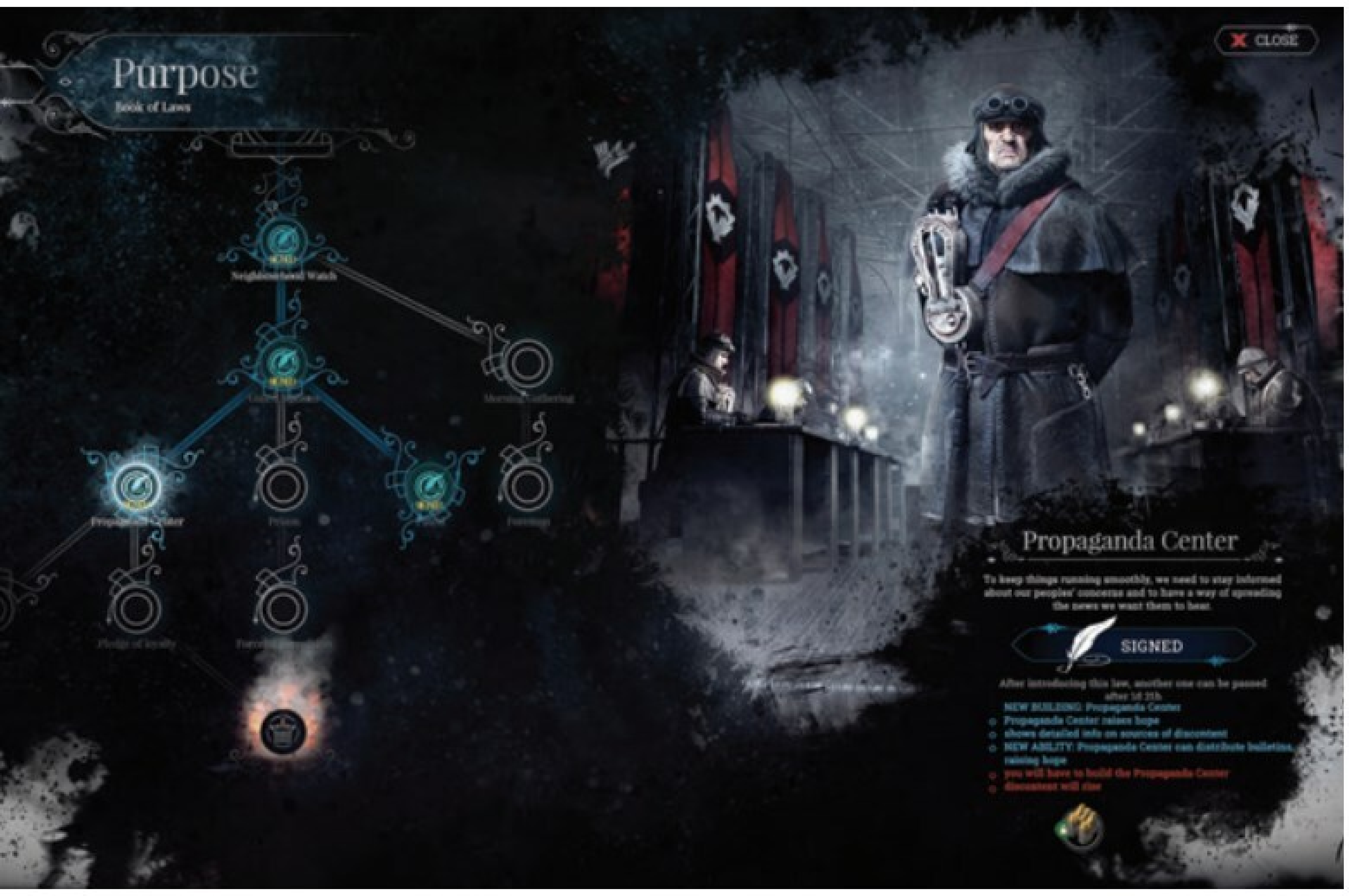
» **Graphics**
Zooming in on your frostbitten settlement reveals a surprising amount of detail, and the barren aesthetic matches the dismal outlook

» **Sound**
As you lament your latest impossible predicament, the soundtrack plays the world's smallest violin concerto

» **Playability**
The systems are clear enough, but some of the early tutorials could have done a better job of articulating how some buildings work in concert with each other

» **Entertainment**
Don't come to Frostpunk if you want sunshine, unicorns, and happy outcomes. This is a bleak game about making difficult decisions to survive inhospitable conditions

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



9 Batman: The Enemy Within Episode 5 – Same Stitch

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC, iOS **Release** March 27 **Rating** M

The finale of Batman: Enemy Within is a joy any way you cut it. I was on the edge of my seat during both paths, wondering what would happen next, feeling dread and excitement all the way until the credits rolled. The episode drops some hints that Telltale isn't done with Batman yet, but if the series continues, topping the beauty and brilliance of this finale will be difficult. – Javy Gwaltney

7.25 Detective Pikachu

Platform 3DS **Release** March 23 **Rating** E

Despite its title, Detective Pikachu isn't for people who like a good mystery. Its larger narrative isn't sophisticated, and I felt like I was just going through the motions to solve the smaller mysteries along the way. Even so, I enjoyed exploring this Pokémon-filled world with a surly Pikachu so much that I almost didn't care how we filled our time. – Ben Reeves

5.5 Extinction

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release April 10 **Rating** M

One look at Extinction's artwork may conjure thoughts of Shadow of the Colossus *and* Attack on Titan. *While attaining the scale of these games, it doesn't succeed in delivering the awe factor of engaging a new giant. They all look the same and you know what you need to do to drop them. Extinction ends up being shallow, repetitive, frustrating, and little more. – Andrew Reiner*

6 #WarGames

Platform PC, iOS **Release** March 14
Rating NR

#WarGames' TV-style branding suggests a second season might soon emerge, but I'm not invested in seeing it continue at this point. It has potential as an experiment in interactive storytelling, but it's going to take better acting, more meaningful choices, and meatier subject matter to keep me on board. – Suriel Vazquez

Visit gameinformer.com/mag for the full reviews

reviews archive

PS4		
A Way Out	7	May-18
Batman: The Enemy Within Episode 4 – What Ails You	8	Apr-18
Celeste	9	Apr-18
Crossing Souls	9	Apr-18
Dissidia Final Fantasy NT	6	Apr-18
Dragon Ball FighterZ	9.25	Mar-18
Fe	5.5	Apr-18
Fear Effect: Sedna	2	May-18
Iconoclasts	9	Apr-18
Kingdom Come: Deliverance	5.75	May-18
Lost Sphear	6.5	Mar-18
Metal Gear Survive	6	May-18
Monster Hunter: World	9.5	Mar-18
Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom	8	May-18
Secret of Mana	6.5	Apr-18
Shadow of the Colossus	9	Mar-18
Sky Force Reloaded	8.5	Mar-18
Station, The	6.5	May-18
Tiny Metal	7.25	Mar-18
UFC 3	8.75	Apr-18
Way of the Passive Fist	6.5	May-18
Yakuza 6: The Song of Life	9.25	May-18

XBOX ONE		
A Way Out	7	May-18
Fear Effect: Sedna	2	May-18
Sea of Thieves	7	May-18
Pit People	8	May-18
Metal Gear Survive	6	May-18
Kingdom Come: Deliverance	5.75	May-18
A Way Out	7	May-18
Batman: The Enemy Within Episode 4 – What Ails You	8	Apr-18
Celeste	9	Apr-18
Destiny 2: Curse of Osiris	7.25	Feb-18
Dragon Ball FighterZ	9.25	Mar-18
Fe	5.5	Apr-18
Fear Effect: Sedna	2	May-18
Metal Gear Survive	6	May-18
Monster Hunter: World	9.5	Mar-18
Pit People	8	May-18
Sea of Thieves	7	May-18
Sky Force Reloaded	8.5	Mar-18
Station, The	6.5	May-18
UFC 3	8.75	Apr-18

SWITCH		
Blossom Tales: The Sleeping King	8	Mar-18
Brawlout	6.5	Mar-18
Celeste	9	Apr-18
Crawl	7.75	Mar-18
Fe	5.5	Apr-18
Fear Effect: Sedna	2	May-18
Floor Kids	6	Mar-18
Kirby Star Allies	6.25	May-18
Lost Sphear	6.5	Mar-18
Tiny Metal	7.25	Mar-18

PC		
A Way Out	7	May-18
Batman: The Enemy Within Episode 4 – What Ails You	8	Apr-18
Blossom Tales: The Sleeping King	8	Mar-18
Celeste	9	Apr-18
Civilization VI: Rise and Fall	8.25	Apr-18
Crawl	7.75	Mar-18
Crossing Souls	9	Apr-18
Fe	5.5	Apr-18
Fear Effect: Sedna	2	May-18
H1Z1	8	May-18
Iconoclasts	9	Apr-18
Into the Breach	9.25	May-18
Kingdom Come: Deliverance	5.75	May-18
Lost Sphear	6.5	Mar-18
Metal Gear Survive	6	May-18
Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom	8	May-18
Pit People	8	May-18
Red Strings Club, The	8	Mar-18
Rust	6.5	Apr-18
Sea of Thieves	7	May-18
Secret of Mana	6.5	Apr-18
Sky Force Reloaded	8.5	Mar-18
Station, The	6.5	May-18
Subnautica	8.75	Apr-18
Tiny Metal	7.25	Mar-18
Warhammer: Vermintide 2	8	May-18
Way of the Passive Fist	6.5	May-18
Where the Water Tastes like Wine	9	May-18

VITA		
Iconoclasts	9	Apr-18
Secret of Mana	6.5	Apr-18

iOS		
Batman: The Enemy Within Episode 4 – What Ails You	8	Apr-18
Florence	8	May-18
Room: Old Sins, The	8.25	Mar-18

ANDROID		
Room: Old Sins, The	8.25	Mar-18

PSVR		
Inpatient, The	6.5	Mar-18
Moss	7.75	May-18

gameinformer Volume XXVIII ◦ Number 6 ◦ Issue 302

STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com
Features Editor
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
West Coast News Editor
Imran Khan imrankhan@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Associate Editors
Javy Gwaltney javy@gameinformer.com
Elise Favis elisefavis@gameinformer.com
Suriel Vazquez surielvazquez@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Senior Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Samm Langer sammlanger@gameinformer.com
Jen Vinson jenifervinson@gameinformer.com
Web Designers/Programmers
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Kristin Williams kristinwilliams@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Leo Vader leovader@gameinformer.com
Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rob@gameinformer.com
Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com
Senior Advertising Sales Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
Advertising Manager
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com
Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Castle rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

For renewal, address change and Power Up Rewards Pro details:

Visit: **www.gameinformer.com**
Email: **customerservice@gameinformer.com**

or send correspondence to:
724 North First St., 3rd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 55401 • Attn: CIS Dept

For subscription inquiry ONLY:
1 (866) 844-GAME (4263)

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, 724 North First St., 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.

Alliance for Audited Media
The New Audit Bureau of Circulations

CREATE WHAT'S NEXT
Be the future of how the future is seen, and create what's next in virtual reality.
Apply today to design tomorrow.
uat.edu/VR
University of Advancing Technology
UAT
Learn. Experience. Innovate.

MAJORS OFFERED

BUSINESS & INNOVATION
BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY
TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION (MS)
TECHNOLOGY LEADERSHIP (MS)
TECHNOLOGY STUDIES

CREATION & SIMULATION
DIGITAL MAKER AND FABRICATION
HUMAN COMPUTER INTERACTION
ROBOTICS AND EMBEDDED SYSTEMS
VIRTUAL REALITY

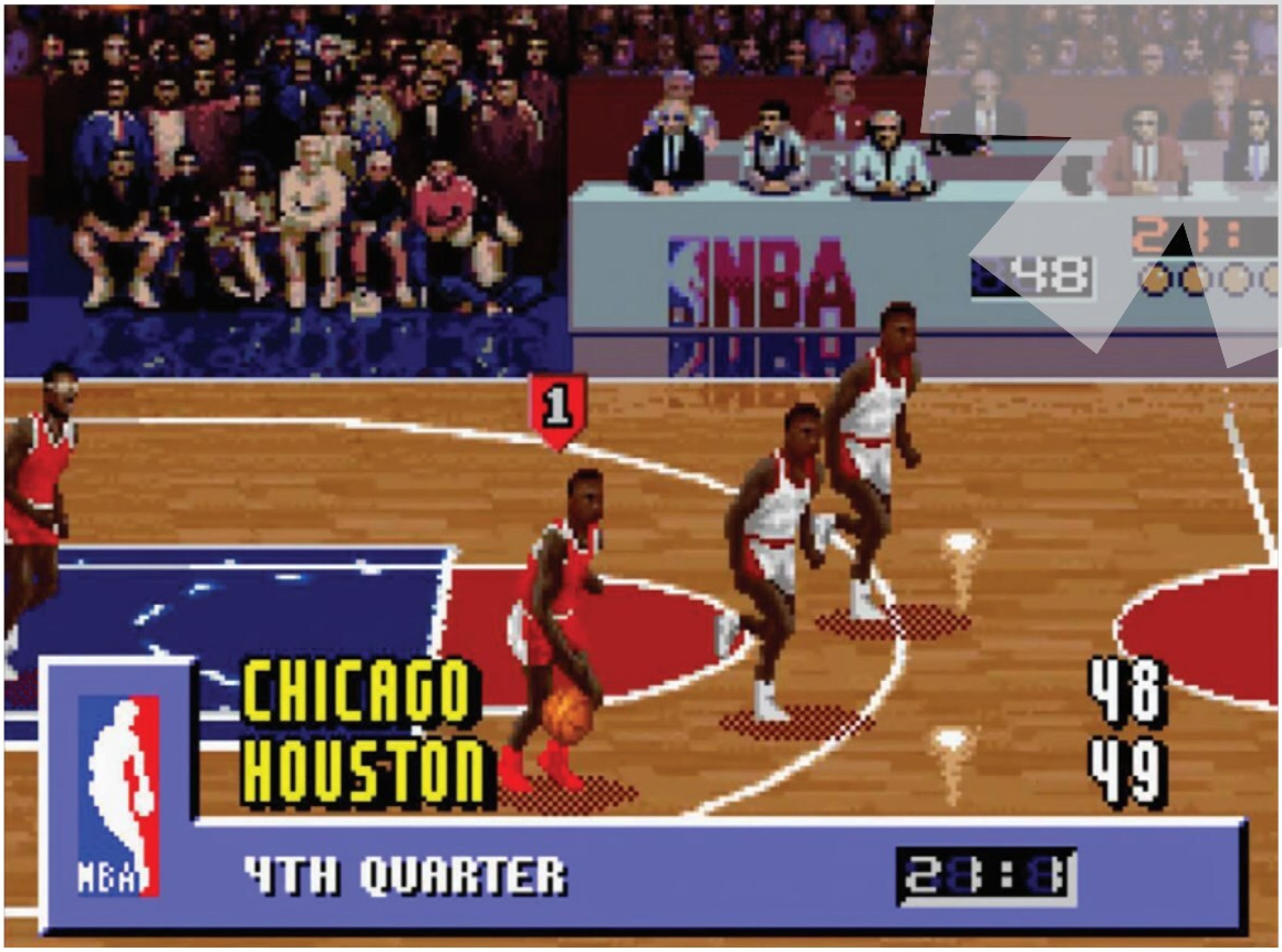
CYBER SECURITY
CYBER SECURITY (MS)
NETWORK ENGINEERING
NETWORK SECURITY
TECHNOLOGY FORENSICS

DIGITAL ARTS
DIGITAL MEDIA
DIGITAL VIDEO
WEB DESIGN

GAME STUDIES
GAME ART AND ANIMATION
GAME DESIGN
GAME PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT (MS)
GAME PROGRAMMING

SOFTWARE ENGINEERING
ADVANCING COMPUTER SCIENCE
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT
SOFTWARE ENGINEERING (MS)

Information about UAT's programs, requisites, admissions requirements, tuition and transfer credit policies can be found at uat.edu. Program disclosures can be found at uat.edu/fastfacts.



NBA JAM

The best sports game of all time celebrates its 25th anniversary

by Matt Bertz

A quarter of a century since it first debuted, NBA Jam nostalgia still burns brightly in pop culture. Sports-network anchors reference signature sayings "he's on fire" and "boomshakalaka" during NBA highlights. T-shirt shops across the internet are stocked up with Team Select shirts featuring both classic and current pro players. This past January, the L.A. Clippers even hosted an NBA Jam-themed night celebrating the games' 25th anniversary, tapping legendary voice of the franchise Tim Kitrzow as the arena announcer.

The longstanding enthusiasm around Midway's iconic basketball game is remarkable considering how mismanaged the brand has been over the last couple decades, as it switched hands from Midway to Acclaim and eventually EA Sports. But the backboard-shattering success of the original arcade cabinet left an indelible impression on both gamers and basketball fans alike.

It didn't take long for NBA Jam to assert its dominance when it launched in 1993, earning more than $1 billion for Midway in its first 12 months before going on to console success on the Sega Genesis and SNES. For context on how huge that number was back in the early '90s, during that year, *Jurassic Park* was the record box-office earner in Hollywood, raking in a mere $357 million.

But that success wasn't predestined. In the rush to release, Midway had to overcome several game development and licensing hurdles to put the game in position to succeed.

The Game Winning Shot

When Mark Turmell set out to create a basketball coin-op game for Midway in the early '90s, his team wanted to create something closer to real basketball than the slapstick Midway predecessor, Arch Rivals. The original version featured generic teams and the development team used players from local Chicago YMCAs and streetball players for digital image capture. But halfway through the project, former Midway president Neil Nicastro asked Turmell why they weren't pursuing the NBA license. "It didn't occur to me that was in the realm of possibility; that had never happened before," Turmell remembers.

The development team put together a pitch, but like a fearsome center patrolling the paint, the NBA marketing team rejected the proposal outright. They results weren't unexpected but the reason was. "They basically said, 'We don't want our NBA logo in these seedy arcade locations,'" Turmell says.

Being based in New York City, the NBA front office's immediate impression of arcades were the drug and prostitution-infested Times Square locations. Midway knew these types of arcades were the anomaly, so they created a new pitch that sold the power of showcasing the NBA brand in bowling alleys, family entertainment centers like Chuck E. Cheese's, and the everyday locations coin-operated games were typically found. The second attempt worked, and the numbers were quite affordable. Turmell speculates they were only playing the NBA about $150 per arcade cabinet, with the rest of the profit going straight to Midway.

Landing the NBA license halfway through the development raised a troublesome question – how could they quickly get NBA players integrated into the game? To solve the problem, they had to be creative, extracting player heads from sports magazines, slides, and VHS tapes of games to get as many angles as possible. The process was a nightmare. "It might have been easier to just invent the internet," Kitzrow jokes.

Finding The Magic

Though the team originally set out to create a basketball simulation, during development the play kept inching closer and closer to crossing the line from reality to fantasy. Every time Turmell would show fellow Midway game designer Eugene Jarvis (Defender, Smash TV) a dunk animation, he would say, "It's cool, but why don't you go a little higher?"

The team thought the game was fun once they figured out how to make the controls responsive, but it was still missing some magic. While walking to Burger King with Turmell one day, designer Jamie Revitt pitched the concept of players heating up. Over lunch they plotted the "make three baskets in a row to get on fire" concept, but not everyone was on board.

"I was more toward the purist side," recalls Sal DiVita. "I wanted to maintain – this isn't a fantasy game, this is still basketball. I didn't mind exaggerated stuff, but it kept going one more step." DiVita refused to make the on-fire art, so Turmell borrowed a Smash TV explosion asset.

"We put that in the game, and Sal within a day or a few hours said, 'Okay, this might be good,'" Turmell says. They kept adding more fantastical elements to the game hidden behind cheat modes that went on to define the game's legacy, like big head mode and celebrity players.

Like an all-star player streaking down the court on a fastbreak, NBA Jam hit arcade floors running, rapidly becoming the most profitable coin-op game in history. The league took note. Midway brought the game to the 1993 NBA All-Star game, and though many players complained about their stats (or not being in the game), the majority fell in love with the game.

Gary Payton sent the developers headshots from multiple angles in hopes of getting into the game, and also had Midway design a custom version of the game featuring Michael Jordan, who wasn't included in the original game because he was signing his own licensing deals. Budding star Shaquille O'Neal would have a cabinet delivered to his hotel room when the Orlando Magic were on the road, and he and his teammates would stay in and gamble on games rather than go to the club.

MIDWAY
NBA JAM
MIDWAY
NBA

Game Informer MAGAZINE
NINTENDO • SEGA • TIPS • STRATEGIES
Sonic and Tails Are Back in Sonic 3 Pg 12
March/April 1994
March Madness! A Basketball Blowout!
Mortal Kombat II All the Moves for this Arcade Masterpiece!
BOOM SHAKALAKA!
NBA Jam is here!
Plus: Total Carnage, Mega Man X and
$3.95

NBA Jam was so hot in the '90s it appeared on the cover of *Game Informer* three times in a 14-month span

The Bigger The Love, The Bigger The Shove

The success of NBA Jam was followed by the equally popular Tournament Edition, which featured expanded rosters and more hidden characters, but despite the raging success the rug got pulled from underneath Midway. Acclaim was publishing the console versions of the game at the time, and when its head of licensing transitioned to a new job in the NBA front office, he gave the license to his former employer. NBA Jam was never the same; as Turmell likes to say, "they just drove it into the ground." Midway continued its arcade basketball legacy with NBA Hangtime and NBA Showtime, both strong offerings in their own right, but they never captured the glory of the original.

EA Sports acquired the license and released a modern day reboot in 2010, but since then the franchise has laid dormant. Basketball fans now turn to fantastic basketball simulations like the NBA 2K series and less captivating arcade successors like NBA Playgrounds, but none match the legacy of the O.G. arcade basketball cabinet.

"It seems crazy to state that NBA Jam had an impact on the success of the NBA, but there's no question it did, not just from the anecdotal comments we had, but from the NBA themselves," Turmell says. "They said a lot of players were not fans of the NBA, but millions played the game and became engaged."

Don’t Say The Z-Word!

by Jeff Marchiafava

We all know the drill: If it looks like a zombie, shuffles like a zombie, and has a craving for human brains like a zombie, chances are it’s ~~a zombie~~ called something completely different in video games. See if you can match the arbitrary alternate names of these undead enemies to their corresponding game.

01. __ ReDeads
02. __ Mutants
03. __ Hollows
04. __ Weepers
05. __ Fungal Scratchers
06. __ Gatherers
07. __ Ghouls
08. __ Guardians
09. __ Wanderers
10. __ Necromorphs
11. __ The Haunted
12. __ The Possessed
13. __ The Infected
14. __ The Flood
15. __ Draugr
16. __ Bio-Organic Weapons
17. __ O.D.s
18. __ Shadows
19. __ Husks
20. __ Zeds

A. Left 4 Dead
B. Resident Evil
C. Dead Space
D. Dark Souls
E. Doom (2016)
F. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
G. Deadlight
H. Amnesia: The Dark Descent
I. Dishonored
J. The Evil Within
K. Sunset Overdrive
L. Metal Gear Survive
M. Fallout 3
N. Darkest Dungeon
O. Mass Effect
P. Killing Floor
Q. Halo
R. The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
S. House of the Dead: Overkill
T. Destiny ◈

20 Correct
Your brain is the wagyu beef of fine zombie dining

15-19 Correct
You could be a professor at Undead University…if that was a thing

10-14 Correct
Your mediocracy blends right in with the teeming masses

5-9 Correct
You need to diversify if you hope to survive the zombie apocalypse

1-4 Correct
You don’t have to worry about your brain being eaten anytime soon…

Answers: 1-R, 2-S, 3-D, 4-I, 5-N, 6-H, 7-M, 8-T, 9-L, 10-C, 11-J, 12-E, 13-A, 14-Q, 15-F, 16-B, 17-K, 18-G, 19-O, 20-P

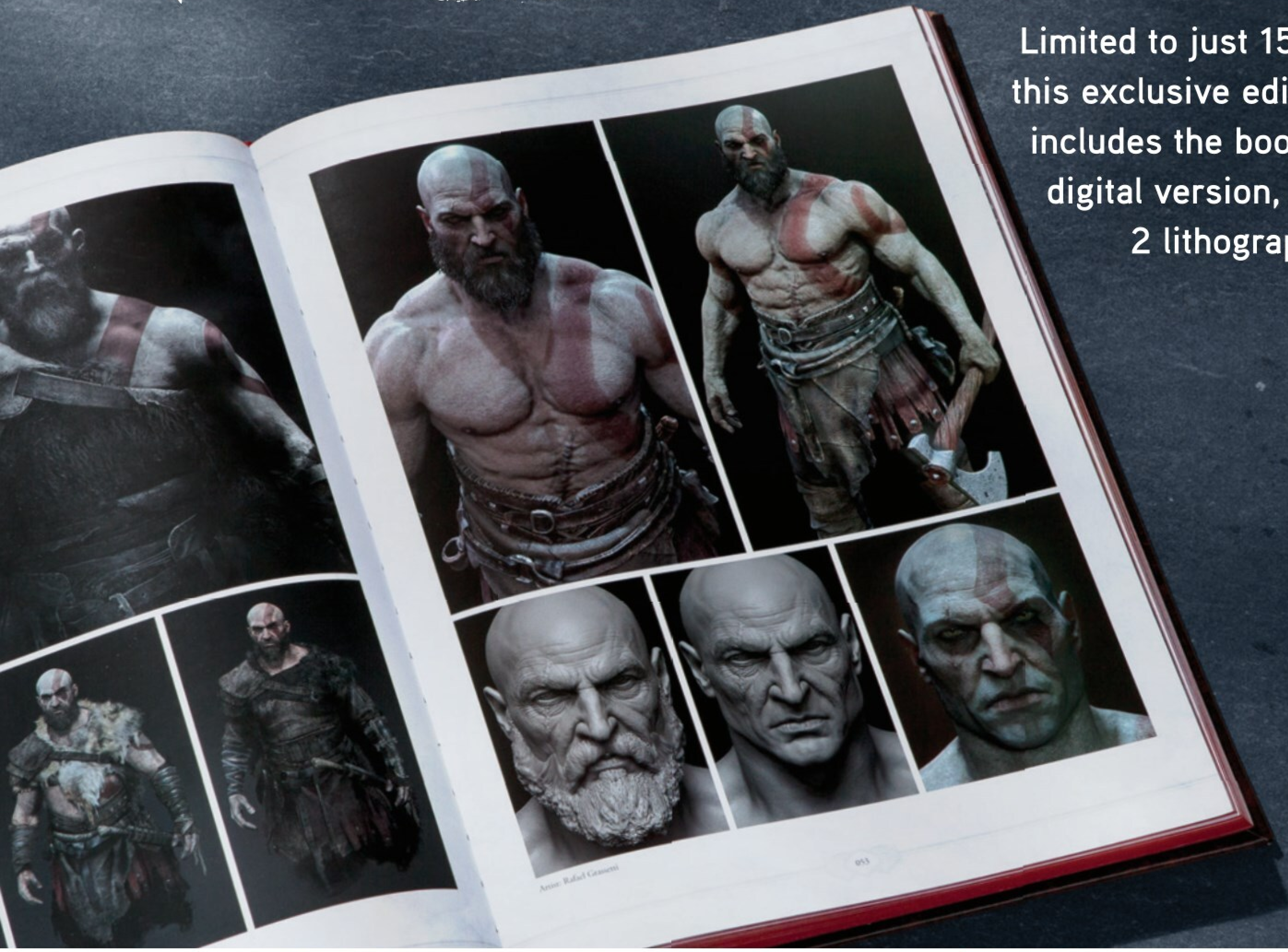
Game Informer Magazine® (ISSN 1067-6392) is published monthly at a subscription price of $19.98 for 1 year or $24.98 for 2 years by Sunrise Publications®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. (612) 486-6100 or FAX (612) 486-6101. Canada & Mexico orders must add $25/yr additional postage; all other international orders add $35/yr. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for $12.00 (includes $7.00 S&H). For subscriptions, back issues, or customer service inquiries call toll free at (866) 844-4263 or mail publisher at above address. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, MN, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS/POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Game Informer Magazine®, 724 North First Street, 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS.

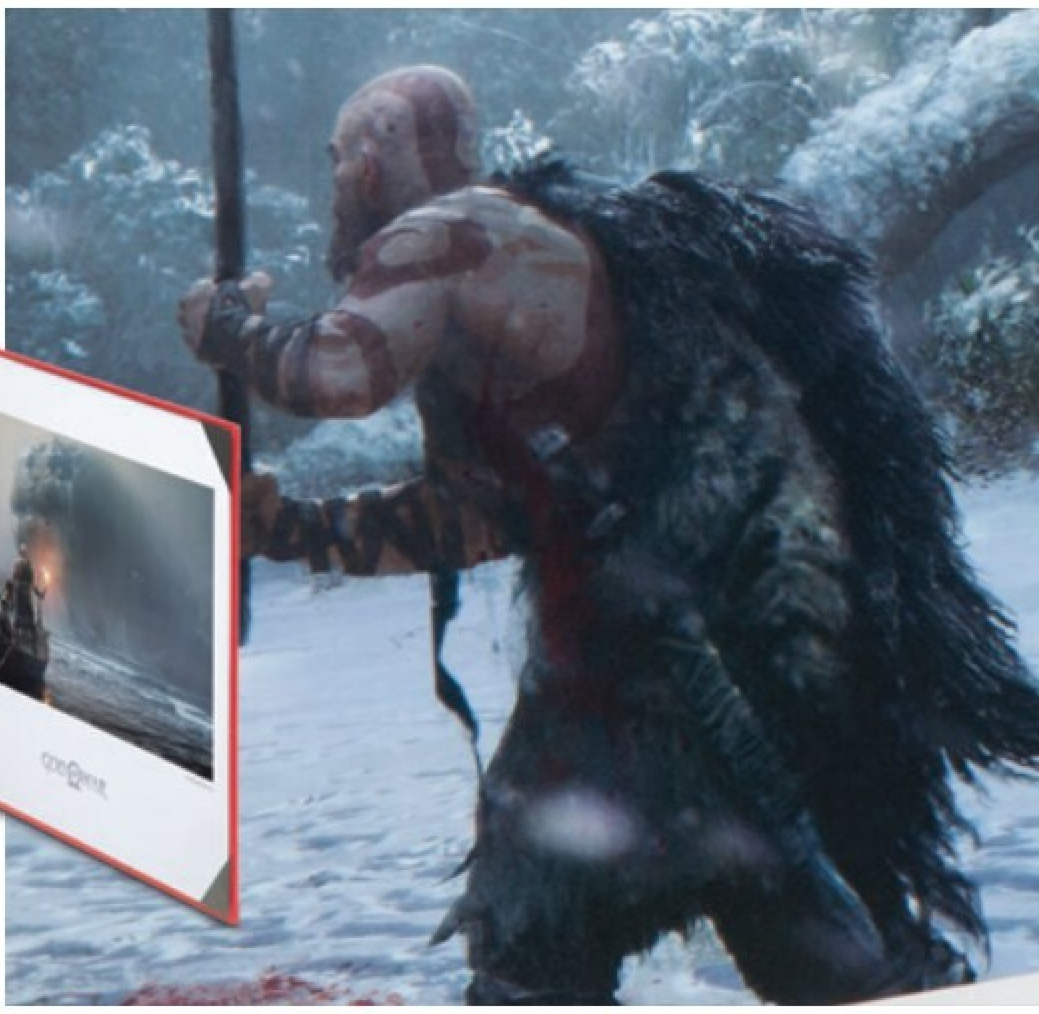
THE ART OF GOD OF WAR

GET YOURS TODAY!

thinkgeek.com/kphq

Limited to just 1500, this exclusive edition includes the book, a digital version, and 2 lithographs.





COOL STUFF AND COLLECTIBLES FOR GAMING, SCI-FI & MORE.
Shop online or find a location near you at **thinkgeek.com/locations**

THINKGEEK®
JOIN IN. GEEK OUT.®

DAYS GONE
17'-5"
STOP
STOP

US $5.99 | EUR €5.99 | UK £3.99
06
7 20150 37158 3
Issue 302 • June 2018